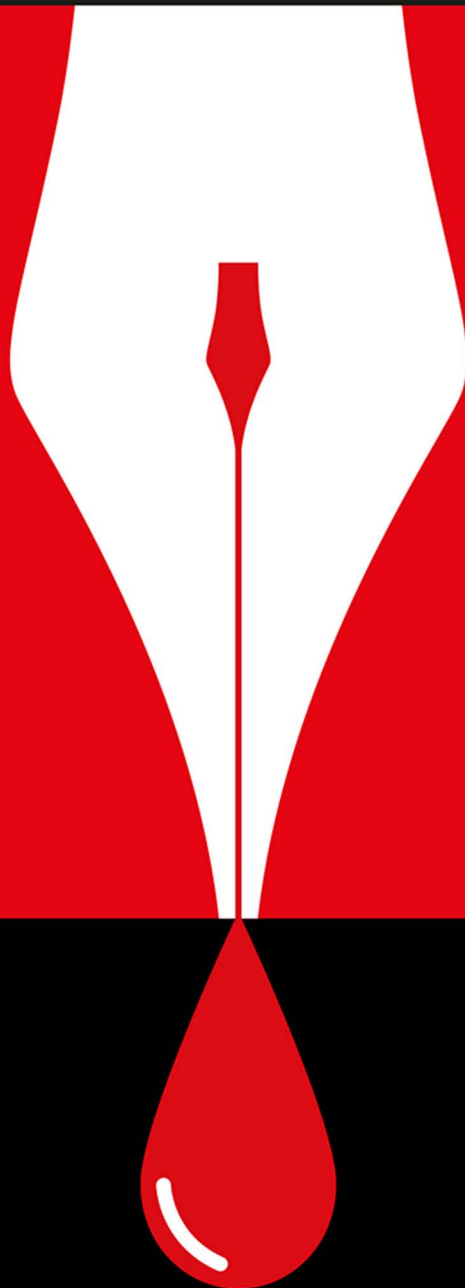


Eric B. Shiraev, Jennifer Keohane,
Martijn Icks and Sergei A. Samoilenko



Character Assassination and Reputation Management

Theory and Applications



“Character Assassination and Reputation Management is scholarly in its approach, impressive in its scope, current in its applications, and engaging in its readability. The best and most timely book on this topic in the field!”

David A. Levy, Ph.D., Professor, Pepperdine University

“This is an essential handbook for understanding why character assassination happens. Hopefully it will be part of the foundation that explores the realistic exercises that can – and cannot – be undertaken to mitigate against such a destructive phenomenon.”

Eric Dezenhall, Crisis Management Consultant, CEO Dezenhall Resources – Public Affairs

“This book represents a very important contribution to political and media literacy, an extremely topical and vital subject of today.”

Martina Klicperová, Ph.D., Czech Academy of Sciences

“This first textbook on a very critical and timely subject is a must-read for students and teachers, theorists and practitioners, and anyone who wants to learn how to be the master of their judgments about people in the world of politics and business. Excitingly written, this book makes us observers of complex strategic operations, where the main weapon against the chosen target is the word. The narrative woven out of many examples from history and modern events allows us to see the methods and tools used by reputation killers and to get acquainted with methods of protection that can be useful to any of us, but especially to current and future politicians, business leaders, and heads of state.”

**Ekaterina Egorova, Ph.D., President of Political Profiler (USA),
and President of the Niccolo M Strategic Communications**

“Today, when the world struggles with the ongoing Global Knowledge Warfare, where characters become frequent targets in information operations, the book touches new and critical patterns of contemporary international relations and security studies.”

Holger Mölder, Ph.D., Tallinn University of Technology

“Too often, new areas of research in communication are too niche and have little relevance to real life. *Character Assassination and Reputation Management: Theory and Application* avoids those limitations by providing fascinating insights about character assassination. The book fully develops the idea of character assassination and how it has application far beyond politics to other aspects of life. I appreciate the richness of the approach that integrates ideas from a number of fields to illuminate character assassination. There is a strong element of strategic communication that helps to ground the book in application. The section on reputation is an excellent examine of the book’s comprehensive approach. The readers will find a well-reasoned discussion of what reputation management is and its intersection with character assassination. The reader will develop a clear understanding of character assassination and how it can affect their lives from this book.”

W. Timothy Coombs, *Professor, Texas A&M*

“The editors have enabled (the matter of) character assassination to develop from a research theme to a full-fledged interdisciplinary field of study, which is of significance concerning the political topicality of the upcoming populism. Character assassination is responsible for the decline of our democratic manners. This book offers the groundwork for a firm positioning of CA-studies within academic education. Students will be made aware of the phenomenon by inserting them into the foundational mechanisms of character assassination: proofing the practical relevance of character assassination research.”

Edwina Hagen, *Assistant Professor, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*

Character Assassination and Reputation Management

This lively textbook offers the first comprehensive examination of character assassination. In modern politics as well as in historical times, character attacks abound. Words and images, like psychological weapons, have sullied or destroyed numerous individual reputations. How does character assassination “work” and when or why does it not? Are character attacks getting worse in the age of social media? Why do many people fail when they are under character attack? How should they prevent attacks and defend against them?

Moving beyond discussions about corporate reputation management and public relations canons, *Character Assassination and Reputation Management* is designed to help understand, critically analyze, and effectively defend against such attacks. Written by an international and interdisciplinary team of experts, the book begins with a discussion of theoretical and applied features of the “five pillars” of character assassination: (1) the attacker, (2) the target, (3) the media, (4) the audience, and (5) the context. The remaining chapters present engaging in-depth discussions and case studies suitable for homework and class discussion. These cases include:

- Historical figures
- Leaders from modern times
- Women in politics
- U.S. presidents
- World leaders
- Political autocrats
- Democratic leaders
- Scientists
- Celebrities

Featuring an extensive glossary of key terms, critical thinking exercises, and summaries to encourage problem-based learning, *Character Assassination and Reputation Management* will prove invaluable to undergraduate and postgraduate students in communication, political science, global affairs, history, sociology, and psychology departments.

Eric B. Shiraev is a professor, researcher, author, and editor of more than twenty books in the fields of political psychology, international relations, and cross-cultural studies. His multidisciplinary approach emphasizes the role of culture and identity in social behavior and politics. He is a co-founder of the Research Lab on Character Assassination and Reputation Politics (CARP).

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Character Assassination and Reputation Management

Theory and Applications

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Preface

This textbook is the first of its kind to provide a comprehensive examination of character assassination. Years in the making, this book is designed to benefit a wide and diverse audience of everybody interested in this phenomenon and its many applications. The book should serve not only as a source of information, but also as an accessible guide to help every reader in understanding the essentials of character assassination as a theoretical, practical, and dynamic field to examine.

Today, as in historical times, character attacks abound. Words and images, like sharp psychological weapons, have sullied or destroyed numerous individual reputations. Ranging across the globe, from the Americas to Asia, from Africa to Europe, through the Middle East and faraway places, those words and images targeted presidents, prime ministers, senators, CEOs, diplomats, scientists, and celebrities. In the past, character attacks have been aimed against Egyptian pharaohs and Roman emperors, medieval sultans, kings and queens, Renaissance popes and Enlightenment thinkers. The list can be extended indefinitely. On a more personal level, many people around us right now can become the target of nasty gossip at the office, experience cyberbullying from colleagues or classmates, or find that compromising stories or pictures of them were published online to tarnish their good name. While character assassination is something that we witness in many spheres of life, there is much about it that we do not understand. How does character assassination “work” and when does it not? Why do people fall so easily when they are under a character attack? How can one prevent and defend against such attacks? This book provides answers and addresses many other questions.

This textbook is based in rigorous research and critical analysis. It is also designed to help you understand, critically analyze, and effectively defend against character attacks. Written by an international and interdisciplinary team of experts, it combines insights from history, psychology, rhetoric, communication science, and sociology. The book discusses various methodologies of character assassination, the impact of character attacks, the dynamics of character assassination in democratic and authoritarian systems and in international politics, and the significance of factors such as culture and gender. Treating over 250 cases of character assassination and numerous concise illustrations drawn from many historical periods, this book provides an ideal guide on the topic for students of political science, law, social sciences, psychology, and the humanities.

The book also offers a clear learning framework as well as engaging pedagogical tools. All 14 chapters start with an opening vignette, presenting a particular case of character assassination that illustrates and encapsulates the chapter's main theme. Each chapter then introduces key concepts and the most outstanding issues relevant to such concepts. We present several contending or complementing theories and approaches. Most importantly, we suggest real-life applications of theory. At the end of each chapter, we present a summary in bullet points, a list of critical thinking questions, and a list of key terms introduced in the chapter. There is an original online database for all the cases presented in this book.

Studying character assassination is intellectually challenging and emotionally rewarding. The discussion of many cases from contemporary U.S. and world politics helps students relate the theories and concepts of character assassination to their own personal experience. At the same time, we have made a conscious choice to include many cases from non-Western countries such as South Africa, Russia, and China, as well as from various historical epochs, with which most students will be less familiar. This allows us to shed light on both the (near-) universal and culture-specific features of character assassination. We examine parallels between past and present while considering the limits of historical analogies. This carefully integrated context not only gives students a way to frame information, but also helps to correct misconceptions.

The four authors of this book are proud to be colleagues and friends. Jennifer Keohane is a professor in the Klein Family School of Communications Design at the University of Baltimore. She has a Ph.D. in rhetoric from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she wrote her dissertation about the feminist activism of American communist women during the early Cold War. Dr. Keohane is the author of *Feminist Voices and Communist Rhetoric in Cold War America*. Sergei A. Samoilenko is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at George Mason University. His research focuses on issues in crisis communication, reputation management, and public relations. He is a co-editor of *Deception, Fake News, and Misinformation Online* and *Media and Public Relations Research in Post-Socialist Societies*. Martijn Icks is a lecturer in ancient history at the University of Amsterdam. He specializes in the history of the Roman Empire, more specifically in the representation and perception of Roman imperial power. He is the author of *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor*, which discusses the reign and posthumous reputation of one of Rome's most infamous emperors. He also has a long-standing interest in the history of character assassination and has co-edited the volume *Character Assassination throughout the Ages*. Eric B. Shiraev is a professor, researcher, author, and editor of more than 20 books on international relations, political psychology, comparative politics, and cross-cultural psychology. His multidisciplinary approach emphasizes the role of culture and identity in politics. Among his current interests is research into character assassination and its impact on people's reputation locally and globally. His research interests also include psychological warfare and defenses against it, psychological profiling of political leaders, the history of science, folk beliefs, scientific foundations of spirituality, and immigration policies.

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Introduction

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe the key features of character and character assassination.
- Explain why character assassination is an important and powerful phenomenon in politics and public life.
- Identify the key components (pillars) of character assassination.
- Suggest major practical applications of the study of character assassination.

People in the past used the sword, the pitchfork, the bullet, the torch, the cannon, the bottle of poison, and recently a missile or a backpack with explosives—all to damage, destroy, and kill. To guard themselves from such attacks, people build shields, armor, trenches, and fortresses. They invent government institutions in charge of security. They create military doctrines and security procedures and launch counterattacks. In this book, we discuss attacks and defenses against them. In particular, we have turned attention to destructive power of a different and less physical kind, namely, to words and images used to harm, devastate, and destroy other people's reputations. We begin with an example.

Few students born in the 1990s or later will immediately recognize the name Gary Hart (b. 1936; see Image 1.1). Yet, Hart was once a prominent politician, a United States senator. So prominent was he that he was widely assumed to be a frontrunner and a shoo-in for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination. Young, rugged, outspoken, and handsome, Hart would—as many believed—shake up the aging Democratic Party. When Hart in 1987 announced that he was running for president, he declared,

Since we are running for the highest and most important office in the land, all of us must try to hold ourselves to the very highest possible standards of integrity and ethics, and soundness of judgment and ideas, of policies, of imagination, and vision for the future.

(qtd. in Bai, 2014, p. 5)

These words would come to seem ominous.

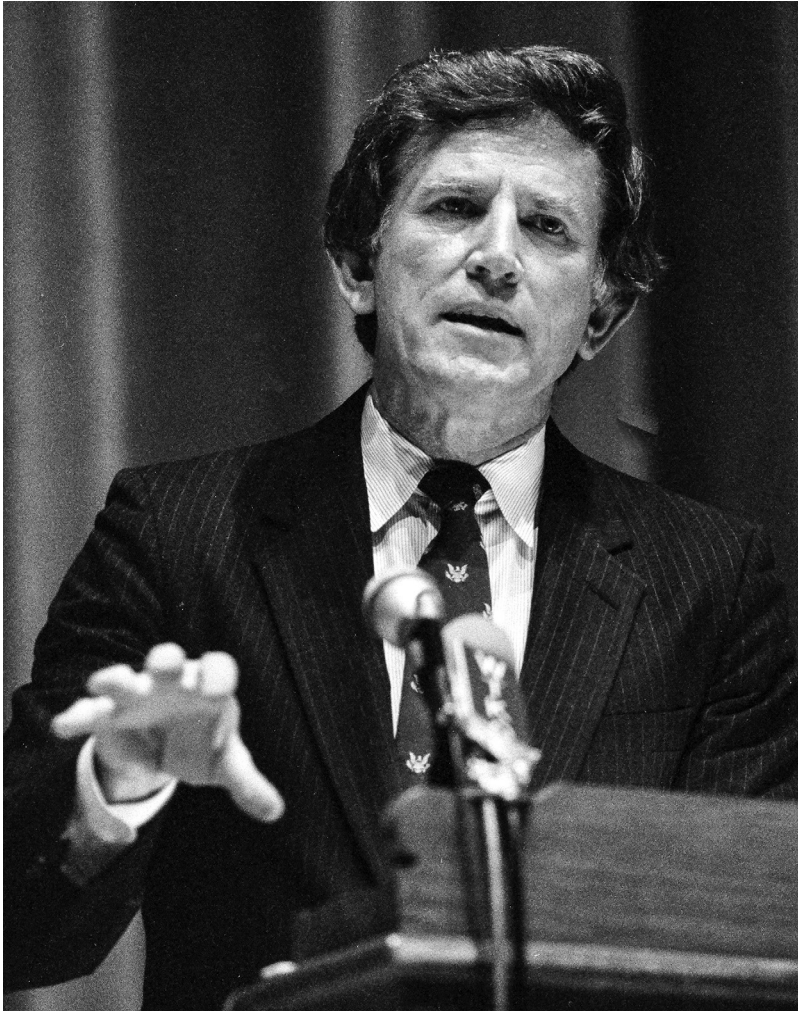


IMAGE 1.1 U.S. Senator Gary Hart seemed like a shoo-in for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination, but things went differently

Source: Photo by Kenneth C. Zirkel, CC BY-SA 4.0

As you should know, Hart did not go on to be president of the United States. Nor did he secure the Democratic Party's nomination. So, what happened in the process? In short, some journalists got a tip that Hart was having an extramarital affair while running for the highest office in the country. Although Hart was seen with women before, it was common practice for the media in the past to ignore the private lives of politicians. But the times were changing. When rumors of Hart's affairs persisted and generated a buzz, he brazenly challenged the media to prove it. "Follow me around," he declared. "I don't care." When the *Miami Herald*, after a stakeout of Hart's Washington townhouse, captured photographs strongly indicating that he was having an affair with a woman named Donna Rice, Hart abruptly suspended his campaign (see Image 1.2). Next, he dramatically retired from politics to a remote cabin where he penned articles

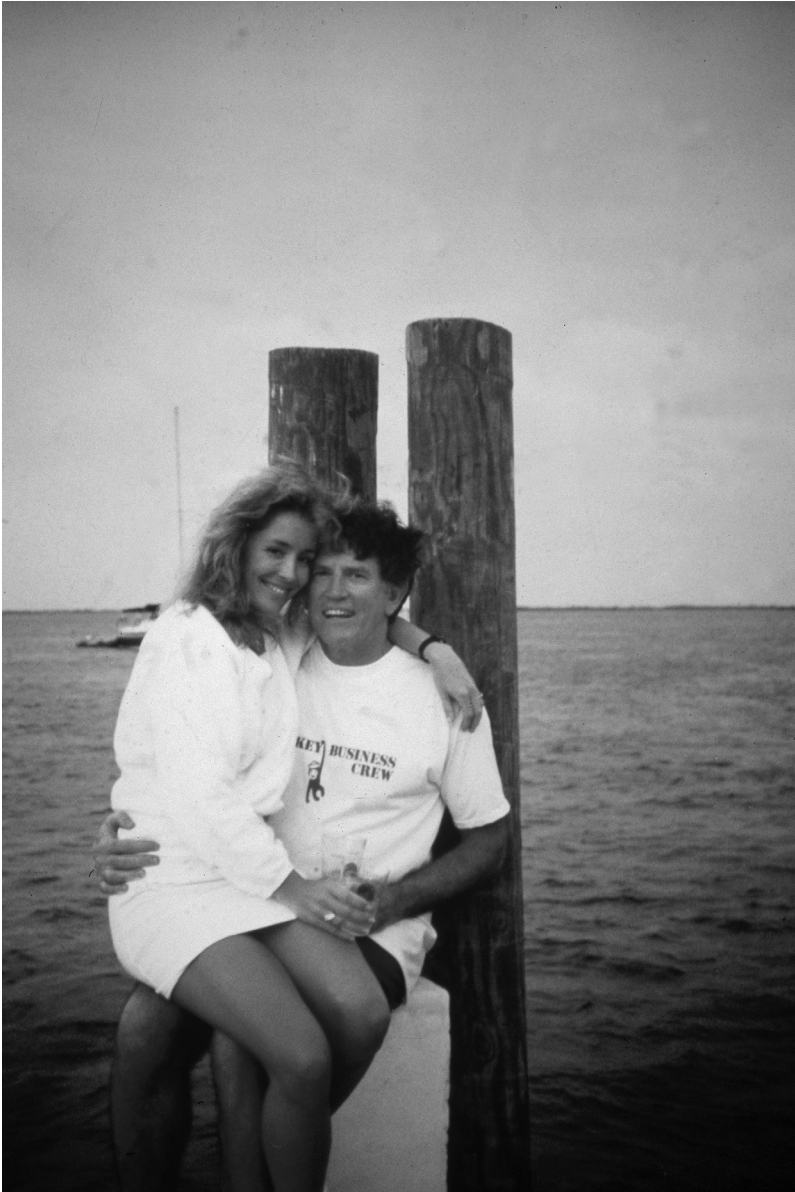


IMAGE 1.2 This picture of Donna Rice sitting in Gary Hart's lap, published by the *National Enquirer*, has come to define his political reputation

Source: National Enquirer/Getty Images

about international affairs and prayed the world would move on and forget about him. And it did. He continued to strenuously maintain that his character, his personal life, and his affair with Rice had nothing to do with his fitness for the office of president.

Yet why did he give up his brilliant and promising political career so abruptly? One can put the blame on journalists and refer to Hart's frequent dismissal of the press. His disdain for their work may have contributed to their eagerness to air his

dirty laundry. Others mention how the advent of satellite technology and lighter-weight cameras and recorders that allowed for easier snooping and quicker reporting also had a hand in this sea change. However, these are merely the people and the means by which the information about Hart spread. The real takeaway from Hart's sudden and catastrophic downfall is the recognition of the old axiom that *character matters* for presidential candidates. The actual story was bigger than just an extramarital affair—it was about Hart's character, his individual traits and whether a person like him could and should be president (Little, 2018).

Even after Hart's career ended, the American public continued to debate the implications of what seemed like a remarkable change in the relationship between the press and the public. Many were cautious of what seemed like a new era in politics that was obsessed with the private lives of politicians. And their concerns were valid: the 1988 presidential campaign devolved into a perpetual circus of sensationalism.

The central question that the case raised is this: is a politician's private life, their individual traits, and their character relevant to their ability to serve the country? Do someone's private habits have anything to do with their ability to defend the Constitution? Opinions, as you can imagine, vary. Some even say Hart simply was unlucky: had he successfully hidden his affair, he would have been president. But luck is a slender strategy on which to build an effective political career. So, why does character matter?

INTRODUCING CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

Before we define key terms such as character assassination, character, and character attacks in a detailed manner, it is essential to acknowledge that it was the media that engaged in an intentional campaign to destroy Hart's reputation and to smear him as an adulterer. Never mind, of course, that the accusations against him were actually true. That is a subject we shall take up in more detail later.

Although Gary Hart did not do himself any favors in terms of handling the press, his withdrawal from the 1988 presidential race was the direct result of character attacks against him by the media. After all, Hart had committed no crime. His political platform had not suffered a radical drop in popularity. Most Democrats and quite a few moderate Republicans actually thought he had pretty good plans for how to run the country! He dropped out purely because the character attacks against him damaged his moral reputation beyond repair.

The Gary Hart case is just one in a long line of political scandals. In current American and world politics, personal attacks are rampant. Whether former president Donald Trump (b. 1946)—by hurtling personal insults at his political opponents—has ushered in a new era of uncivil politics in the United States and even globally will long be debated (Baker & Rogers, 2018; Muszynski, 2017). Yet there is little doubt that Trump, before and during his presidency, was busy attacking people of all walks of life. In fact, the *New York Times* had a running list of “people, places, and things” that President Trump was attacking on Twitter. Neither foes nor former associates were spared. Trump's former Republican fellows and competitors for the 2016 presidential nomination like Jeb Bush and Ted Cruz had long lists of insults that Trump hurled at them. Unsurprisingly, his Democrat opponents in the general election, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden in 2020,

had a list several columns long. It includes insults like “crooked!” “corrupt!” “lying,” “sleepy,” and “heartless” among many, many more (Lee & Quealy, 2019).

Character attacks have been rampant in other countries as well. World leaders like former U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013) have been the frequent targets of attacks. She was smeared as a “man eater” and called “Thatcher, the Milk Snatcher” for her bullying, pushy style of politics (Baxter, 2013). These attacks were certainly related to stereotypes regarding gender and leadership, a topic which we will discuss throughout this book. Moreover, in non-democratic regimes, leaders themselves often use character assassination as a tool to harass and eliminate dissidents who speak out against their policies. This has happened in Russia under President Vladimir Putin (Shiraev & Khudoley, 2019) and in China under its recent and current leadership. In China, for example, the state-controlled media often use words to smear the reputations of military members accused of accepting bribes. This allows President Xi Jinping to perfect his own reputation as the only available and effective fighter against corruption (Yang, 2020).

Of course, character attacks are not limited to the realm of politics, either. They occur in business, education, religious circles, science, sports, entertainment, and other professional and social areas. For starters, one example will be particularly illustrative. It displays character assassination in the area intertwining popular culture and science. Robert Gallo, one of the researchers who helped discover the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS was routinely smeared in the media. In *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, a 1987 ground-breaking book covering the AIDS crisis by Randy Shilts, Gallo is portrayed as an egotistical, petty person who got in the way of advancing AIDS research. When actor Alan Alda played him in an HBO movie based on the book, he represented Gallo as Shilts had written him: seeking only self-promotion instead of helping to cure the disease. In the movie, he was portrayed as an evil scientist who wanted people to suffer until he got recognition. Gallo reported receiving hate emails each time HBO aired the movie, even 25 years after it debuted (Harden, 2012).

Do not think that the act of attacking someone’s reputation is a new phenomenon. While character assassination certainly has been helped by the advent of social media and other communication technologies that allow people to send messages immediately and anonymously, character attacks are a timeless phenomenon. They actually date back to the advent of human civilization. As long as humans have been living in groups, they have been finding ways to smear each other to gain power and advantage. While we will take up the history of character assassination in the next chapter, there is strong evidence of character assassination dating back to the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans over 2000 years ago.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBJECT

Studying character assassination is important for several reasons:

1. Given that character assassination has been a consistent feature of political and social discourse since ancient times and across cultures and territories, it is worthy

of examination and assessment. We simply should better understand this phenomenon that has had a huge impact on the world around us.

2. Character assassination goes well beyond our personal use of social media to smear other people for personal reasons. It is also a powerful tool in the struggle for political influence. It is used in business in attempts to compromise competitors and thus increase revenues. In international politics character attacks against national leaders are on the rise as well. Character attacks against political leaders have become part of modern cyberwarfare to target people's knowledge, attitudes, manipulate them, sway them in a particular direction, and influence public opinion on important social and political issues as well as impact voting behavior. The rise of Russian troll factories to meddle in elections through posting fake and scandalous stories under fake social media accounts is a new arena of character assassination online (Shirayev & Mölder, 2020). In these factories, workers are paid nice salaries to post things online given assigned key words (MacFarquhar, 2018). Then, computer algorithms spread the fake posts to create viewership and drive traffic to the posts. Other factory employees are assigned just to add comments to the fake posts.
3. There are new horizons for character assassination, too. While this phenomenon appears timeless, as we shall see in this book, it is also true that the rise of mediated communication means that more people have more tools to attack others' characters. Social media provides all of us the opportunity to launch character attacks in the form of tweets or anonymous posts, or spread the attacks launched by others far and wide. Cyberbullying has been on the rise even among children and young adults. The Cyberbullying Research Center notes that cyberbullying affects from 10 to 40 percent of children in the United States (Hinduja & Patchin, 2020).
4. There is a practical reason for studying character assassination, too. Today we are all exposed to hundreds of messages a day on our phones and computers. Studying character assassination can help build our own media savviness and social responsibility. It will allow us to recognize and assess character attacks for what they are, so that we are not as easily manipulated. We also hope that this exploration will give you the tools needed to potentially avoid such attacks and respond to them (or at least weigh the pros and cons of responding) should you ever come under fire of words and images.

It bears noting that we are not in the business of teaching students how to craft character attacks. Our goal is not to add more invective to the world at all! Instead, we believe that understanding this phenomenon is necessary to be an informed consumer of persuasive messages in the world. Only through this cross-historical and multidisciplinary perspective can we understand the impact of character assassination on the world around us.

KEY TERMS: CHARACTER AND CHARACTER ATTACKS

Up to this point, we have used terms like “character assassination” and “character attack” rather loosely. What do we mean exactly when we say that someone's character

is assassinated? Is there a difference between character assassination and related terms like slander, smear, defamation, and libel?

Before we can answer these questions, we need to discuss what is meant by “character.” The word has roots in ancient Greek, where *kharakter* originally referred to a mark impressed on a coin. In Classical Greece, each city minted its own coins with its own marks (see Image 1.3), so that *kharakter* came to mean distinctive feature, something that is *characteristic* for something or someone (Frow, 2014). Since ancient times, character was often referring to something identifiable in the individual, something referring to behavioral standards (Gerber, 2020). In modern-day English, *character* can have several and evolving meanings, which tend to be imprecise. In American social sciences and especially in psychology of the early 20th century, for example, professionals used the terms character, personality, and temperament almost interchangeably. Gradually, temperament became commonly associated in professional literature with biological factors. **Personality** stands for the totality of relatively stable features of an individual, such as their mental faculties, behavioral traits, and emotional makeup. These features are assumed to represent a person’s unchanging essence (Danziger, 1997). Character came to mean something similar to personality, but with an added moral dimension. Where personality describes the traits someone possesses in somewhat neutral terms, character describes them in terms of “good” and “bad” traits. In the context of our discussions, we will define **character** as the moral aspects of an individual’s behavior and experience.

We see this reflected in colloquial speech as well. Sometimes, “character” is used to describe people who stand out for their eccentric behavior: “Uncle Brad is such a character!” Sometimes we refer to character describing a movie or a theatrical play: “She played that character well!” But more often, the word signifies a moral judgment. When we say that a man or woman shows character, it means that they possess



IMAGE 1.3 A coin from the ancient Greek city of Ephesus. Each Greek city minted its own characteristic coins

Source: Creative Commons license: CC BY-SA 3.0

admirable traits such as honesty, integrity, courage, and trustworthiness. Someone who lacks character is supposed to be unreliable, cowardly, or otherwise falling short of moral standards. To avoid confusion with other definitions, some authors use the term moral character (Gerber, 2020).

Of course, we should keep in mind that these standards vary from culture to culture. Moreover, cultures tend to apply different moral standards to different groups of people, such as men and women. Let's turn to ancient Rome for instance. Wives there were expected to be submissive and obedient to their husbands, to stay at home, rear children, and perform domestic tasks. Even on their tombstones, women were praised because they served the household and "worked in wool" (Larsson Lovén, 1998). But this particular definition of "good character" certainly did not apply to Roman men, who were supposed to show their qualities in different ways, for instance through valor on the battlefield. Moreover, the ancient Roman notion of a "good woman" had little to no place for traits that modern progressive societies value in women, such as education, outspokenness, and independence of mind. Evidently, "good character" cannot be defined in universal terms.

We should make an important distinction between character and reputation. While character is about personal traits we actually possess, **reputation** can be defined as a complex social evaluation of an individual's character and behavior. Briefly put, reputation is concerned with how other people perceive and judge us. As we shall see later in many examples presented in this book, most people in a society have to ostensibly adhere to general moral and behavioral standards and expectations. If they occupy important positions, such as holding political or religious office, it is important for them to maintain a good reputation in the eyes of the general public, or at least those parts of it that are relevant to them. For instance, a member of the aristocracy in 18th century France had to uphold certain standards to maintain the respect of their fellow aristocrats, such as refined manners, eloquent speech, bravery on the battlefield, and devotion to military glory.

People of "good character" are likely to have a good reputation, which means that their character is first perceived and then generally approved by others. However, character can also be questioned, doubted, probed, or criticized. **Character attack** is a communicative act containing critical information about an individual's character. Such attacks can take many forms, from a spoken remark in a TV debate to a cartoon printed in a newspaper to a meme making the rounds on the Internet. Often, character attacks are focused on specific things that the person under attack actually or allegedly said or did, but the implications are much broader. There is always the suggestion that the questionable acts and utterances do not stand by themselves, but reflect the man or woman's general character, the supposedly unchanging essence that makes them who they are. When the reporters published their articles on Gary Hart and Donna Rice, they were not just asking whether a presidential candidate was having an amorous fling; much more importantly, they were questioning Hart's self-declared integrity and commitment to traditional family values—in short, his good character.

Although many personal attacks are aimed at an individual's moral features, other individual traits can also become the focus of attack. For instance, a person could be attacked for appearing ugly, stupid, incompetent, or mentally unbalanced. While some

of these traits could possibly be perceived as personal flaws, they are definitely not *moral* shortcomings. Strictly speaking, then, they do not relate to character, as character is concerned with the moral dimension of an individual's personality. However, that does not take away from the brutal fact that a person's intelligence, skills, mental instability, or emotional vulnerabilities may prompt negative and harmful value judgments in others. In practice, it does not matter whether someone is charged with stupidity or cowardice: although only the latter counts as a moral flaw, the results can be just as damaging in either case. Therefore, in this book, we will make no forced distinction between attacks on moral and non-moral personal features. We will call them both "character attacks."

LET'S DISCUSS

An individual's character is a gateway to this person's reputation. They are not identical. A person always has a character but may not, at least in theory, have a reputation. One person can have two or more reputations. Consider two examples.

Example one.

I live in the woods, far away from nearby villages, with my small family. I am an honest, resilient, and hard-working person, but I have no public reputation because other people do not really know me. One day, somebody stops by my modest house and then falsely accuses me of being a . . . polygamist. Bad rumors about me are spreading rapidly. Immediately, my reputation is created. And it is bad. I appear as a religious zealot in the eyes of the public.

Yet a day later, another person visits me and discovers that the women who live with me are in fact my mother, my wife, and my two teenage daughters. The rumors about my polygamy turned out to be false. Although my reputation immediately skyrockets (I am now a good family man in the eyes of the public) my character remains the same: I always was, and still am, an honest, resilient, and hard-working person.

Example two.

I am the leader of a gang. We rob, harass, and burglarize people (sorry about this). At the same time, I am a diligent and straightforward man. These are my character traits. To my fellow gangsters, I am the most reputable person in the word. Yet for the police, I am the most disgusting "scum of the earth." As you can see, in the eyes of the law enforcement, my reputation is extremely bad.

And now imagine, I "flip" and surrender to the police and confess about all my crimes. The entire gang thus is arrested and thrown in jail. I (still) am a diligent and straightforward person. But the jailed gang

members will certainly change their minds about me. To them, I will become a traitor, a creep, and a snitch. That will be my reputation in their eyes. Yet the police will defend my reputation by emphasizing my honesty and common sense, which they had rejected in me a short time ago.

Questions: What is the difference between a person's character and the same person's reputation? Which factors affect character and which influence reputation? Think about yourself. Can you provide examples when different people saw you differently and in different circumstances gave different assessments of your individual personality?

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

Now that we have established the groundwork, we are finally turning to the key definition. **Character assassination** is the deliberate destruction of a person's reputation or credibility through character attacks. Its meaning is twofold: on the one hand, it can refer to the process of attacking someone's character; on the other, to the result of such attacks if they are successful (Icks & Shiraev, 2014; Icks, Shiraev, Keohane, & Samoilenko, 2020).

Unpacking this definition, there are several points to touch upon. First, character assassination is always *deliberate*, which means it is done with the intention to damage another person. In 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy discussed Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu at a political meeting. They thought they were having a private conversation, not realizing a nearby microphone picked up their words. When Sarkozy said that he could not stand Netanyahu because the man was a liar, Obama replied: "You're fed up with him, but I have to deal with him more often than you do" (MacAskill, 2011). While these remarks definitely cast Netanyahu in a bad light, we cannot consider them a case of character assassination. After all, Sarkozy and Obama had no clear intention to damage their fellow politician: they spoke privately to each other, assuming (incorrectly) their conversation would not go public.

In practice, it is not always possible to establish the intentions of character attackers with rock-hard certainty. They may frame their attacks as legitimate concerns or constructive criticisms. They may say that they were merely joking and did not really mean to harm anyone. They may hide their identity altogether. Nevertheless, when we consider their expressions in context, their intention is often clear enough. When a campaign ad is criticizing the clothing and hairstyle of a female politician, its aim is probably not to make a fashion statement. When a right-wing newspaper keeps publishing scandalous stories about the private lives of left-wing political candidates in the months leading up to an election, they are probably engaged in more than objective reporting on a need-to-know-basis.

Second, character assassination is always *public* in nature. If somebody says to you privately that your behavior after the party last night was embarrassing and it is

great that nobody else saw you behaving like that—is this talk a character attack? Not at all. While criticisms and insults can be traded in private and are meant to hurt the feelings of the insulted party, character attacks are meant to be seen, heard, or read by an audience or at least another person. If they fail to reach that audience, they cannot do any damage.

This ties in to a third point, namely that character assassination is all about *perception*. The goal of the attacker is to influence the way others see a particular person. Strictly speaking, *character assassination* is a somewhat ambiguous term, because it is not character as such that is damaged or destroyed. After all, questioning someone's honesty, toughness, or courage does not make them any less honest, tough, or brave. Their actual character is unaffected. The only thing that potentially changes is other people's perception of that character. If they come to believe that an honest man is actually a liar, or that a strong, courageous woman is really a weak coward, the attacker has reached his goal. It would thus be more accurate to speak of reputation assassination, but that term is not commonly used, and we are aware of this.

Character attacks are not about telling inconvenient truths. There are many examples of character attacks that are patently false. During the 2000 U.S. presidential election, it was alleged that the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain, had fathered an illegitimate child with a black woman. In fact, he had legally adopted a girl from Bangladesh (Banks, 2008). During the 2008 election, it was alleged that the Democratic candidate, Senator Barack Obama, was secretly a Muslim (Bacon Jr., 2007). Both allegations were untrue, but they probably affected voters' opinions on these candidates. Perhaps more often, character attacks are partially true, exaggerating a person's flaws or presenting their acts and statements out of context. Some attacks may even be completely true and accurate. Do they still count as character assassination? In everyday speech, they would not: there, the word *character assassination* nearly always implies that someone has been dragged through the mud unjustly. However, the principles and mechanisms of character attack remain the same regardless of the truth or falsehood of the allegations. Therefore, we do not specifically categorize "just" and "unjust" attacks as "good" or "bad." For our purposes, all that matters is that someone's character was attacked with the aim to damage their reputation. The assessment of every attack is a matter of judgement and, of course, of historical perspective.

A fourth and final point is that character assassination is mainly concerned with the reputations of *individuals*. It would be possible to define the term more broadly and include attacks against the reputations of organizations, companies or even ethnic and religious groups or entire countries (Aspriadis, Takas, & Samaras, 2020). It is easy to imagine, for instance, that someone could blemish the good name of a multinational company by revealing that it was engaged in large-scale corruption and tax evasion. However, companies and countries are not people. While they may be associated with positive moral qualities such as responsibility, environmental awareness, and commitment to human rights, it is questionable to what extent they can be said to possess personality and character. In this book, attacks on organizations, companies, countries, and other collective entities will be mentioned, yet generally left out of detailed consideration.

TERMS RELATED TO CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

When discussing character assassination, people often use related terms such as slander, smear, and defamation. *Smearing* or *mudslinging* have a very negative ring because they tend to refer to unfair, malicious character attack and related undignified practices of disinformation, gross exaggeration, or lies. The term *vilification* is often used too; literally, it means that someone is described as a villain. Vilification concerns attacks that aim to highlight a person's moral defects (as opposed to incompetence, unattractiveness, etc.). If those moral defects are portrayed as particularly grave and shocking, we can say that a person is *demonized* (literally, turned into a demon).

Defamation is the communication, usually intentional, of a statement about individuals that harms their reputation. Defamation and calumny are mostly synonymous with character assassination, except that they can also refer to attacks on companies, social groups, and other collective entities. In many countries, calumny and defamation constitute punishable offenses under the law, but usually only if it can be proved that the allegations are intentionally false. In common law, two types of defamation are distinguished: *slander*, which refers to defamation in spoken form, and *libel*, which refers to defamation in written form (Carter, 2008). In colloquial speech, however, slander is often used to refer to many forms of character assassination.

The term **invective** is also used in relation to character assassination. This is a form of rhetoric involving rude or abusive language that aims to cast someone in a negative light. The ancient Romans considered invective and its opposite, praise, as important rhetorical tools and engaged in them frequently. They even wrote handbooks explaining how best to attack one's opponent in a speech (Arena, 2007)! Finally, the term *ad hominem* or *argumentum ad hominem* (literally "argument to the man") also refers to character attacks in a rhetorical context. It describes an argument in a debate that constitutes a personal attack on another participant, for instance by questioning their motives or credibility (Walton, 1998).

THE FIVE PILLARS OF CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

Although character assassination occurs in many forms and can be studied from many viewpoints, five elements are the most essential. We call these the five pillars of character assassination (see Figure 1.1). They are the *attacker*, the *target*, the *medium*, the *audience*, and the *context* (Icks, Shiraev, Keohane, & Samoilenko, 2020).

The *attacker* is the person or group that launches the character attack. They can have various reasons for doing so. For instance, a candidate in an election tries to damage the reputation of her opponent. An entrepreneur smears the good name of a business rival to eliminate the competition. In other cases, the attackers may just need a convenient scapegoat to direct public ire away from themselves. Tabloids, websites, or social media often publish scandalous stories about celebrities to increase sales or viewership. In some cases, attackers act out of sheer malice or are inspired by revenge against somebody. We will discuss attackers and their motives in more detail in Chapter 4.

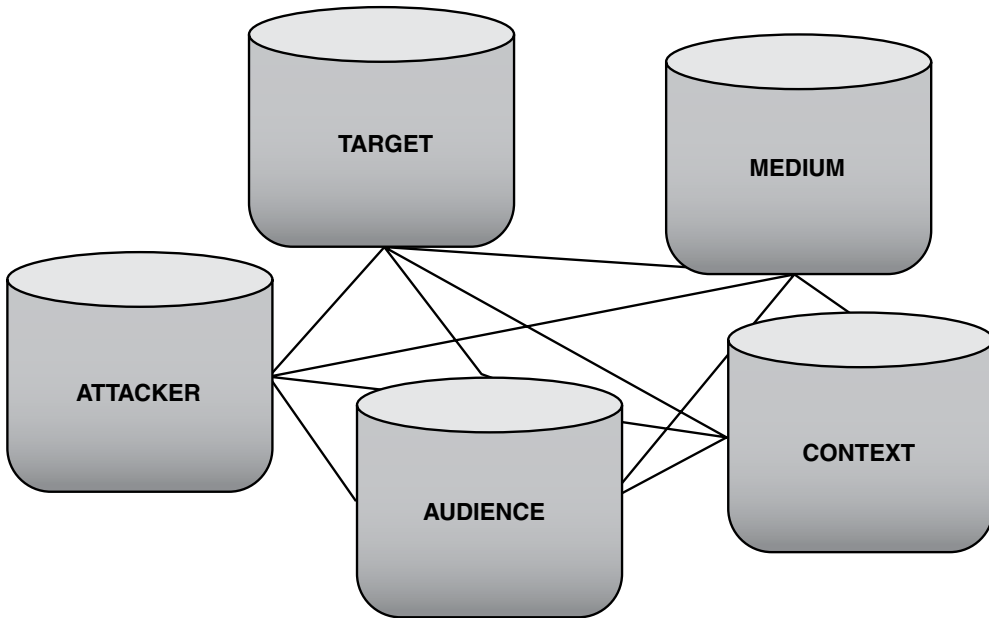


FIGURE 1.1 The five pillars of character assassination

Note: The diagram represents the five interconnected elements of character assassination as a process

The *target* is the person whose reputation the attacker aims to damage. If the attack is successful, the target becomes a victim of character assassination. However, character attacks can also have a backlash effect, causing the public to view the attacker in a less favorable light (Roese & Sande, 1993; Carraro, Gawronski, & Castelli, 2010). In some cases, they may even have the opposite effect of what was intended, creating sympathy for the target and resentment toward the attacker. Targets are usually living persons, but people can also come under attack posthumously—sometimes even centuries after their death. This usually happens if they are seen as the symbol or representative of a larger movement, religion, or ideology. For instance, posthumous character attacks are still targeted against the Prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam and Karl Marx, “father” of communism. In times of revolution and political upheaval, political leaders that have been overthrown may suffer posthumous character assassination at the hands of the new regime. We will review such cases in Chapter 2.

Attackers and targets are not necessarily equal in terms of their status. If they are roughly comparable in power and the resources they have at their disposal, such as rival candidates in a political race, we speak of *horizontal* character attacks. However, it can also happen that a single individual or small group of people take on a powerful political or religious leader, or that a dictatorial regime or multinational corporation cracks down on a vocal critic. In such cases, we speak of *vertical* character attacks. A good example is Václav Havel (1936–2011), a Czechoslovakian playwright whose human rights campaign made him the target of character attacks by his country’s communist government in the 1970s and 80s (Klicperová-Baker, 2014). Havel withstood

the attacks and later became the first president of the Czech Republic. We will consider such targets in more detail in Chapter 4.

Each character attack requires a *medium*, whether it is an interview, a speech, a campaign ad, a tweet, a cartoon, or a pamphlet. This pillar also includes “the media,” such as news channels, radio broadcasts, and websites. These media possess an agency of their own and can decide to run certain stories while ignoring others. More than that: they can create stories of their own or decide to frame them in ways that make a particular person look good or bad. The media, then, are active agents in the game of character assassination (Sabato, 1991). We will take a closer look at their role in Chapter 6, where we discuss the means and venues of character attacks.

The fourth pillar is the *audience*. It is their response which determines whether a character attack is successful or not. Often, character attackers frame their allegations with a particular audience in mind. For instance, if they want to persuade a Christian community, they will allege that the target subscribes to un-Christian values and has performed un-Christian acts. Since different audiences have different values, it is possible that one and the same character attack greatly impacts one group while leaving another largely unaffected. Character assassination is thus a relative term: usually, someone’s reputation is only destroyed in the eyes of *some* groups. The impact of character attacks is analyzed in Chapter 7. We will discuss audiences in more detail in Chapter 4 and will turn to responses to character attacks in Chapter 8.

Finally, each character attack takes place in a *context*. This is a broad term that can refer to the political landscape, the cultural norms, the economic and technological circumstances, and any other external factors that shape and influence character attacks. It makes a big difference whether an attack takes place in a democratic or an autocratic political system, as we will see in Chapters 10 and 11. The level of technology determines what kind of media are available, how many people can be reached and how fast. Only by taking such contextual circumstances into account can we properly assess character attacks.

STUDYING CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

This book will show that character assassination is found in many cultures across time and space. Character assassination, as we stated earlier, occurs in politics as well as in the business world, the religious sphere, academia, sports, and many other domains. In short, we are dealing with a widespread, varied, and multifaceted practice. That certainly has an impact on our lives.

Many academic disciplines contribute to our understanding of character assassination. Political scientists tend to examine the impact of negativism, smear tactics, and negative campaigning on voters’ choices (Shiraev & Keohane, 2020). Psychologists analyze behavioral choices and emotional processes that determine how some people initiate and others respond to character attacks and insults (Tolson, 2019). Sociologists examine the social role of character assassination in the contexts of groups and institutions (Samoilenko, 2020). Communication specialists mostly focus on the

role of the media in communicating character attacks to the public (Keohane, 2020). Rhetoric experts tend to examine the arguments and techniques that debaters employ to undermine each other's reputations before particular audiences (Engels, 2009). Historians explore character assassination in societies of the past (Icks & Shiraev, 2019). Legal scholars discuss laws and legal cases related to libel and slander (Odgers, 2019). Research in these fields, of course, overlaps and the list could be expanded. All these disciplines offer valuable perspectives and insights, but each of them only explores particular aspects of character assassination.

In this textbook, we adopt a multidisciplinary and cross-cultural approach. That means that we will not limit ourselves to the modern Western world but will look at cases of character assassination from many countries and historical epochs. Exploring and comparing these cases will help us come to grips with the wide variety of character assassination practices and to recognize features that are *central*—meaning that they occur in all or most cultures—and features that are *peripheral*—specific to particular cultures. We examine these features in Chapter 9. Drawing on methods and insights from various academic disciplines, we will explore the many different facets of character assassination throughout this book. In particular, we will draw on the fields of political science, political psychology, communication studies, rhetoric, sociology, and history.

A presumptuous reader is likely to assume that these introductory remarks have revealed everything they would like to know about character assassination. Not so fast. You have approached just a small portion of the subject in point. As many tell us, character assassination is a bigger pie than they dared to expect in the beginning. With these words, we turn in the next chapter to history.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Character assassination is all around us. Character attacks happen in politics, religion, academia, sports, and many other domains of public life. They are not limited to any particular country, but occur in every region of the world and have probably done so since the dawn of civilization.
- In our current media environment, character attacks are thriving. Politicians, corporations, and other entities are constantly trying to influence our opinions by smearing the reputations of their rivals. Every one of us may experience firsthand what it is like to have our character assassinated, for instance through cyberbullying. If we understand what character assassination is and how it works, we are better able to guard ourselves against it instead of becoming its puppets or victims.
- Character assassination is the deliberate destruction of a person's reputation or credibility through character attacks. It is important to make a clear distinction between *character*, which concerns the moral dimension of an individual's personality, and *reputation*, which describes how character is seen and judged by others. While character attacks criticize someone's character, they actually aim to

damage or destroy that person's reputation. This always happens intentionally and in public.

- Five key components or “pillars” feature in every character attack: the attacker, the target, the medium, the audience, and the context. The focus is on individuals as the targets of character attacks, but a case can be made that character assassination can also happen to groups, organizations, or even entire countries.
- Character assassination is studied by many academic disciplines, including political science, political psychology, communication science, rhetoric, history, and law. In this book, we will adopt a multidisciplinary, cross-cultural perspective to study character assassination from many different angles.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Have you ever experienced a character attack against you? What did you experience, and how did you respond?
2. Is every character attack unfair to those who are under attack? Suggest examples—real or hypothetical—when an attack on someone's reputation is reasonable and even justified. If you think that character attacks are never justified, please explain your view.
3. What is the difference between character attack and slander? Suggest examples that clarify the distinction.
4. Have personal attacks against another individual ever helped anybody to achieve their goals? Could you search and find such cases in modern public life?
5. Suggest examples for vertical and horizontal character attacks.
6. Provide examples of vilification. How are characteristics of a “villain” or an individual with a “bad character” linked to historical and cultural contexts? Discuss such contexts.

KEY TERMS

Character The moral aspects of an individual's behavior and experience.

Character assassination The deliberate destruction of a person's reputation or credibility through character attacks.

Character attack A communicative act containing critical information about an individual's character.

Defamation The communication, usually intentional, of a statement about individuals that harms their reputation.

Invective A form of rhetoric involving rude or abusive language that aims to cast someone in a negative light.

Personality The totality of relatively stable features of an individual, such as their mental faculties, behavioral traits, and emotional makeup.

Reputation A complex social evaluation of an individual's character and behavior.

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Character Assassination in History

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe character assassination as a historical phenomenon with many timeless and time-specific features.
- Critically discuss how cultural, political, and technological developments over the centuries shaped practices of character assassination.
- Explain the opportunities and challenges inherent to studying historical cases of character assassination.
- Suggest recommendations about the application of historical studies to modern cases of character assassination.

Many kings and queens have ruled England over the centuries, but perhaps the most notorious was Richard III (1452–1485). You probably know him from the classic Shakespeare play under the same name, where he appears as a power-hungry villain who ruthlessly manipulates, schemes, and murders his way to the throne. “And thus, I clothe my naked villainy,” he gleefully remarks while onstage, “with old odd ends stolen out of holy writ; and seem a saint when most I play the devil” (Act 1 scene 3).

Shakespeare as an author may have sealed Richard’s terrible reputation, but the name-calling already began during the king’s lifetime and increased after his death. The contemporary historian John Rous, for instance, described Richard as a misshapen freak of nature and compared him to the demonic figure of the Antichrist. But was Richard III really such an evil ruler? In fact, present-day historians argue that he was probably the victim of character assassination (Horspool, 2015). One of the main reasons for such character attacks was the fact that the king’s successor, Henry VII (1457–1509), seized the throne by force and founded a new dynasty, so he had every motive to villainize his predecessor to justify his actions. Centuries pass by but the images remain. . . More than 500 years later, it is very hard to separate fact from fiction and establish what was really going on at the time. What is important is that in the popular

imagination, Richard will probably remain a villain forever. How many other historical characters have become victims of character assassination?

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Teaching courses on character assassination we often heard similar questions from our students early in the semester: Why do we have to study those cases from the past? Could we just skip them and turn to the most exciting or troubling events of the day? The obvious impatience of some of our students is understandable. All their thoughts are about the present and the future, not the past. And here comes history . . . *Who needs it?*

Eventually, even our skeptical students change their minds. After several lectures and class discussions, they realize that studying contemporary society and politics often requires a deeper, critical, and comprehensive inquiry into history. Looking at historical cases of character assassination draws our attention to striking parallels with current-day examples, but also highlights important differences. Some things you considered self-evident may turn out to be peculiar to your own time and culture. Other things may be surprisingly recognizable even in societies from many centuries ago. History provides us with a smorgasbord of cultural, political, and technological scenarios that can teach us a lot about the nature of character assassination. They help us understand how character attacks are shaped by political systems, cultural values, and technological possibilities. More generally, history's lessons often allow us to see today's events comprehensively, critically, and with less bias, which is common in our judgments no matter who we are.

This chapter will not attempt to cover the history of character assassination from ancient times to the present. That would be impossible as well as unnecessary: the book discusses historical cases in every chapter. Instead, we will focus on a few carefully selected examples that aptly demonstrate how political structures, cultural traditions, the available media, and other specific historical circumstances impacted practices of defamation across the centuries. At the same time, these examples will draw our attention to central or recurring features of character assassination.

THREE LESSONS FROM HISTORY

In studies of character assassination, we are hoping to draw at least three important lessons from history and apply these lessons to our critical analysis of today's developments. First, character assassination has some common features that should appear in all ages and cultures. In Chapter 1, we defined central features of character assassination. The key idea behind this concept is that particular elements of human reasoning and action are likely to remain consistent throughout generations. Indeed, scholars discuss whether certain basic features of human motivation, emotion, and behavior have significantly changed throughout history (Buss, 2019). For example, character as an individual's stable set of moral traits (as you should remember from Chapter 1) has

been assessed around a stable set of characteristics: honesty, integrity, benevolence, and resilience are usually praised, while dishonesty, greed, and selfishness are universally condemned. Mountains are leveled, forests disappear, and royal dynasties come and go, yet human brains function in somewhat similar ways, as far as the argument goes. Like hundreds or even thousands of years ago, people experience envy and jealousy, feel irritated and angry, seek revenge, display kindness, and forgive their adversaries. Like in the past, some people today want to gain recognition through insults and ridicule. Others, like hundreds of years ago, contemplate and execute smear campaigns against their opponents to exercise personal justice. Ulterior motives as well as altruism motivated our ancestors in similar ways, and they motivate many people today to character attack others. According to this view, it does not really matter what methods of character attacks these people use: it could be Twitter or a printed pamphlet attached by a rusty nail to a wall near a market square. The motivation, the emotion, the contemplation behind each character attack remains the same: to damage someone's reputation.

History—and this is the second lesson—also teaches us that character assassination has distinct historical-specific features or characteristics deeply rooted in the concrete historical and cultural aspects of the time. In Chapter 1, we identified these as the peripheral features of character assassination. Most essential aspects of an individual “character” evolve because of continuous cultural changes (Garber, 2020). What was considered moral in ancient Greece or Rome can be immoral today. Slavery was accepted for centuries in various cultures. It is almost universally rejected and condemned today. Women have been (and often still are) discriminated against in every walk of life, and this bias has been embedded in cultural beliefs and norms, such as the *domostroy*, a codebook in medieval Russia for patriarchal and stringently ruled family life. Sexism only began to slowly erode in the past few centuries. Religious identity is another dynamic feature, and religious piety is no longer a mandatory requirement for having a “good” character. The same assessment is valid for sexual behavior and sexual orientation. Sexuality is a very important topic in our discussions for many historic reasons. And one of them stands out: for centuries and in most cultures, it was a taboo to even publicly discuss it. Any revelation about the intimate details of a person's sexual life could have been devastating for this person's reputation, especially for women.

Culture is connected to politics: political changes often require changes in cultural norms. Similarly, cultural changes in society deeply affect the political and legal systems rooted in it. In ancient Rome, marriage (*conubium*) was supposed to be monogamous. A Roman citizen, male or female, was allowed to have only one spouse by law. However, in other cultures, polygamy was legal, and a man would not be condemned for having multiple wives. (Yet in most cultures, women could not have multiple husbands!) Politics affect what we say and whether it is regarded as a verbal attack. In the United States, for example, federal law protects individuals from discrimination or harassment based on the following nine **protected classes**: sex, race, age, disability, color, creed, national origin, religion, or genetic information. Any verbal, digital, or other type of attack against a person's character, which is somehow—implicitly or not—associated with these protected classes could potentially open the attacker to legal counteraction. These “protected” categories are relatively new to the United States' legal culture and are completely unknown in some other countries.

Historical changes are inseparable from technological advancements. Although earlier we argued that character assassination has many consistent features across centuries, the technological means by which information is spread have definitely played a major role in character assassination methods and strategies. It would take weeks or months before a rumor about a Roman emperor or a medieval king would spread across a territory of a few thousand square kilometers. In medieval England, kings had armies of messengers on foot and on horses who would distribute royal directives, announcements, and grants. One can only imagine what other information, including gossip, these people could carry with them. As you understand, today's situation is quite different. The printing press, telegraph, radio, television, the Internet, and social media have all brought something specific to the nature of character attacks, their effectiveness, as well as to appropriate defenses against such attacks.

Third, if we want to be good students of history, then we must be careful ones. If we want to draw useful lessons from history, we must be eager learners yet critical thinkers at the same time. There are at least two types of mistaken assumptions or cognitive fallacies people frequently make when they read and talk about history. One is their overwhelming reliance on history and the tendency to bring historical analogies to each and every case related to current affairs. No doubt, analogies borrowed from the past may work today. Yet they may completely fail. Attacking a medieval king in a written pamphlet is only remotely compatible to a tweet attacking a political leader in a modern democratic country. For one, the odds of being prosecuted for this action are vastly different. The other cognitive fallacy is the total denial of historical lessons under the infamous and flashy assumption that “the lesson of history is no one learns.” As this assumption suggests, history can be easily dismissed. Our position is somewhere in between these extremes. Of course, cases from history are not exact replicas of what is happening today. As Mark Twain reportedly put it, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” Historical parallels are powerful, but they are not 100 percent accurate. However, what we learn from history helps us navigate in the turbulent waters of today’s facts and opinions. Let’s be smart and informed navigators.

How far back in time can we trace character assassination? Very far indeed. Individuals were attacked and reputations destroyed long before the invention of social media, the Internet, TV, radio, or even newspapers and the printing press. Actually, character assassination outdates even the ancient Greeks and Romans. People in the very oldest civilizations already practiced it. Let’s start with this example.

A CASE OF A CONDEMNED PHARAOH

Pharaoh Akhenaten (ca. 1375–1334 BCE; see Image 2.1) ruled the Kingdom of Egypt in the 14th century BCE—long before the birth of Jesus and the start of our modern calendar. His son was the famous Tutankhamun, popularized as “King Tut” after his treasure-filled tomb was discovered in the 1920s. But Akhenaten was a remarkable pharaoh in his own right. He is often regarded as the world’s first monotheist. Like most people in the ancient world, the Egyptians worshipped many gods, but Akhenaten



IMAGE 2.1 Funerary figurine of Pharaoh Akhenaten

Source: Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain

was especially devoted to the sun god Aten. He even changed his original pharaonic name, Amenhotep IV, to Akhenaten, “devoted to Aten.” The pharaoh moved his court to a new capital, Akhet-Aten, and made it the center of sun worship. While many temples were dedicated to Aten, the other Egyptian gods were increasingly sidelined. Eventually it appears their worship was banned altogether. The only remaining god was Aten, with Akhenaten claiming a special position as his son and representative on earth (Hoffmeier, 2015; Redford, 1984).

Akhenaten died at a relatively young age, in the seventeenth year of his reign. We have no idea what caused his death. Could it be that some angry priests or traditionalists who spurned his heretical views removed him? We can only speculate. What we do know is that Akhenaten's son, Tutankhamun, soon distanced himself from his father's religious policies. He abandoned the new capital of Akhet-Aten and allowed the other gods to be worshipped again. Things returned to normal. As for Akhenaten, his memory was not treated kindly. At some stage the dead pharaoh's tomb was desecrated, his images vandalized, and his buildings destroyed. His name was removed from the official list of kings, as were the names of his immediate successors on the throne. If he was referenced in official texts at all, it was as "that criminal of Akhet-Aten."

It appears that the assaults on Akhenaten's memory did not start immediately after his death. Perhaps they were initiated by the Ramesside dynasty that came to power several decades later. As the historian Cyril Aldred (1968) remarks, "it was a tenet of the totalitarian rule in Ancient Egypt that the kings of a new dynasty should regard their immediate predecessors as illegitimate in order to enhance their own divine right" (p. 256). That would explain why not only the name Akhenaten, but also the names of his successors were removed from the list of kings. However, other historians have doubted whether an official government campaign can account for the vandalization of Akhenaten's images. If so, they certainly did a sloppy job, because the damage was rather haphazard (Redford, 1984, pp. 222–231). In short, a lot remains unclear about the culprits and their motives. Although it seems a good guess that the pharaoh's controversial religious reforms must have had something to do with his images being vandalized, hard proof is lacking.

Whatever really happened, we can certainly regard Akhenaten's posthumous disgrace as a case of character assassination. Through his building projects, magnificent statues, and boastful inscriptions the man had tried to establish his reputation as a powerful, wise, and pious ruler. His enemies, whoever they were, tried to destroy his status and rejected his place in the line of pharaohs. We consider such actions as character attacks because they are about **memory erasing** or attempts to diminish or even eliminate an individual existence from the collective memory of future generations. The attempt was by no means unique. In fact, many pharaohs suffered posthumous attacks on their memory.

Was this type of character attack unique to ancient Egypt? Not at all. As history shows, erasing from memory, which involves a systematic deleting of information about a person from printed and other sources, has been documented in other cultures and in other times. Deleting from memory was also combined with **silencing**, which—in the context of character assassination—is about preventing a living person from defending his or her character, after it has been attacked or erased from printed or other sources. As a result of erasing and silencing, an individual no longer occupies people's attention or even "disappears" from people's collective memory. We will return to this topic in Chapter 4, where we discuss various types of character assassination.

Remember, we need to utilize historic cases with a grain of salt, so to speak. Unlike modern cases, most of which contain factual and verifiable evidence, the stories of Akhenaten and other rulers from the distant past pose many challenges to historians. Because our documented sources are limited, and historic cultures are often so very

different from our own, there is much we do not know or understand. In Akhenaten's case, it is doubtful that the attackers aimed to erase the pharaoh's existence from public memory altogether, because they did not destroy his images in a systematic manner. In all likelihood, the vandalizations only served to emphasize his disgrace. But many questions regarding the "who," "when," and "why" of the matter remain open to debate.

Nevertheless, there is much we can learn from such ancient cases of character assassination. For one thing, they draw our attention to the deep psychological and behavioral roots of this phenomenon in human culture. Even in a place as distant and alien to us as ancient Egypt, we find that assaults on the reputations of public figures took place. Let's return to our earlier argument that some aspects of character assassination seem to occur across times and cultures, while others are more culture specific. Akhenaten's fate demonstrates this nicely. On the one hand, the destruction or vandalizing of statues of dead or deposed leaders is something people have done and have been familiar with throughout centuries. Statues of dead leaders have been downed during the French Revolution of the late 18th century, the Russian Revolution in the early 20th century, and during modern wars. The fall of the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s led to the removal of many communist statues and monuments from squares and office buildings (Vukov, 2003). When U.S. forces took control of Baghdad in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the event was celebrated by the toppling of a 39-foot statue of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein at Firdos Square. The footage of this symbolic action went around the world as a potent indication of U.S. victory.

On the other hand, it is clear that we can only understand the attacks against Akhenaten's memory in the political circumstances and cultural context of its time. Unlike modern Western countries, ancient Egypt was an autocracy. Moreover, its population, as we believe today, consisted mostly of illiterate peasants with little knowledge of politics. Whereas current-day politicians are constantly criticized or even ridiculed on websites, in newspapers, cartoons and tweets, no such media infrastructure existed in Akhenaten's time. Even if it had, and even if Egyptian peasants would somehow have acquired the means and skills to use those media, no reigning pharaoh would have tolerated any negative remark on their qualities and capabilities. In short, there was no room for public debate on the merits and faults of a living ruler in ancient Egypt. Only posthumously was it possible to attack a pharaoh's character—and even then, the person taking the initiative would probably be . . . the new pharaoh.

Yet again, you can correctly argue that what we have discovered or guessed about in the case related to ancient Egypt, can in some ways refer to modern authoritarian regimes, such as in North Korea, Iran, China, and Russia. Very few people in these countries have in recent times dared to publicly attack their top political figures, party leaders or religious scholars; while the decision about how to judge previous leaders—either retired or dead—very much depends on what the current leader thinks. In authoritarian regimes, across cultures and times, such leaders have been the authorities who organized and directed the most effective forms of character assassination or erasing from collective memory.

The case of Akhenaten also helps us to further discuss the idea that in almost any historical phenomenon, practices of character assassination are shaped by a whole

range of cultural, political, and technological factors. In our next cases, we will use examples to discover more about how these factors influenced the defamation of individuals, to see which venues they opened and which limitations they posed.

A CASE OF CICERO'S SPEECHES IN ANCIENT ROME

"In heaven's name, Catiline, how long will you take advantage of our forbearance? How much longer yet will that madness of yours make playthings of us?" These words, spoken by Marcus Tullius Cicero in the Roman Senate in 63 BCE, form the opening of one of the most famous speeches from the ancient world (*First Catilinarian Oration* 1; Cicero, 1976).

When Cicero spoke, Rome was an unrivalled superpower. Its legions conquered lands across the Mediterranean and beyond. Some people tend to associate the Romans with emperors, but in 63 BCE they were still organized as a republic, led by two annually elected consuls. Cicero was one of these consuls. Together with his colleague, who plays no role in this story, he possessed the highest civic and military authority. Although the people elected consuls, they invariably came from the ranks of the Senate, a gathering of the richest and most powerful men of Rome. They held all the important political offices, governed provinces, and commanded legions. It was these senators that Cicero was addressing in his speech.

However, this was not a regular Senate meeting. It was not convened in the Senate house on the Forum, but in the more secure temple of Jupiter Stator, Rome's most powerful deity. Guards had been posted outside. We can imagine the attendants stirring uneasily in their seats, aware that something was amiss. When Cicero's accusing words thundered through the room, they were aimed at one among their number in particular: Senator Lucius Sergius Catilina, or Catiline, as the name is translated in English. In what would become known as the *First Catilinarian Oration*, Cicero claimed that Catiline was a *hostis*, an enemy of the state. For months, the consul alleged, this man had been conspiring against the establishment, gathering minions about him to set fire to the city, murder all good men, and seize power for himself. The Republic was in dire peril, as the speech continued, but thankfully Cicero had recognized the danger in time. If only the other senators would give him their wholehearted support, he would make sure that Catiline was stopped.

Cicero was not wrong in verbally attacking Catiline as a threat to the establishment. Although the latter came from an aristocratic family, he profited himself as a champion of the common people, many of whom were living in deep poverty. Catiline had called for the cancellation of all debts and a redistribution of the lands of the rich, but these revolutionary cries had not been enough to get him elected to the consulship. In fact, he had lost the elections two years in a row. Apparently, that prompted him to rally support for a conspiracy (Ramsey, 2007, pp. 16–18). Whether he was sincere in his desire for change or whether he just craved power is up for debate. Cicero's speech certainly does not waste any words on Catiline's political agenda, nor on the plight of his impoverished supporters. Instead, the orator keeps stressing the threat they pose and the murder and slaughter they have in mind. The conspirators are compared to

robbers and pirates, while Catiline himself is portrayed as a black-hearted villain who leads a wicked, shameful life. Time and again, he is urged to depart Rome: “If my slaves feared me as much as all your countrymen fear you, I would think that I should get out of my house. Do you not consider that *you* should leave the city?” (section 17).

The *First Catilinarian Oration* is a marvelous piece of character assassination. It should be stressed that Cicero did not actually have any evidence to condemn Catiline as an enemy of the state. All he had to go on were rumors and suspicions. Therefore, all he could do was turn public opinion against the scheming senator, in the hope of chasing him away. In this he definitely succeeded. According to the Roman historian Sallust, Catiline rose to protest after Cicero had finished his speech, but was shouted down by the other senators, who called him an enemy and a traitor (*The War with Catiline* 31.7–9; Sallust, 2013). Frustrated, he left the city. In the following weeks, some of the conspirators were arrested and executed, while others picked up arms against the Republic and were defeated on the battlefield. Catiline himself was among them. His conspiracy came to nothing.

Cicero was certainly an exceptional orator, but his use of rhetoric to assault the character of his opponents was typical of politics in the Roman Republic. The situation was thus very different from that of ancient Egypt, which we discussed earlier. There, power was in the hands of an absolute ruler who left no room for dissenting voices. In Rome, power was divided among a small group of men who were in constant competition with each other, but who also needed each other’s support, as well as that of the Roman people, to stay in the saddle. In order to wield power, they had to persuade, and in order to persuade, they had to be able to give rousing speeches. Therefore, rhetoric was a vital political tool (Alexander, 2007). Through their speeches, Roman orators made every effort to project positive images, i.e. to create good reputations for themselves, and to undermine the reputations of their rivals. The practice of invective was considered an art unto itself, with rhetorical treatises discussing at length how to effectively damage the reputation of one’s target. Anything was considered fair game, from someone’s physical appearance and eccentric dress to their family background, their sexual preferences to their penchant for heavy drinking (Arena, 2007).

Ancient Rome, in short, took character assassination to a level of sophistication that went well beyond anything we find in Akhenaten’s Egypt. When Cicero was verbally attacking Catiline, he employed many techniques that are still used today, such as using powerful inflammatory labels, attributing evil intentions to his opponent, inducing fear and anxiety in his audience, and creating a polar opposition between “us,” the good guys, and “them,” the bad guys (Icks & Shiraev, 2019). At the same time, we should not forget that the speeches of Cicero and his fellow senators could only function on a very small playing field. There were no TV channels to broadcast them, no newspapers to print them. Even if they were circulated afterwards, few would be able to obtain and read them. The primary audience of any speech, then, were the people who were actually present in the room. Character attacks were sophisticated, but their scope was limited.

Before we move on, we should point out that historians analyzing the speeches of Cicero and other historical characters face a methodological challenge. Unlike modern speeches, which are printed, recorded, and saved in many ways, professional

stenographers did not prepare public statements and speeches from the past. Typically, authors themselves or eyewitnesses would arrange detailed transcripts afterwards, relying mostly on their own memory or recollections of others. How accurate and trustworthy are their accounts?

A CASE OF LUTHER TAKING ON THE POPE

Our third case takes us to a watershed event in Western history: the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church had been a dominating force in medieval Europe, uniting its many kingdoms and principalities under one universal faith. Popes not only commanded spiritual, but also secular power, controlling large parts of Northern Italy and getting involved in territorial disputes with other worldly leaders. Now, the supremacy of the Church was challenged, leading to the fragmentation of the Catholic world and the birth of many Protestant denominations.

The pivotal figure of the Reformation was the German monk Martin Luther (1483–1546; see Image 2.2), who ignited the spark of the movement by the publication of his *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517. In these theses, Luther denounced the wrongs he saw in the Church, in particular the trade in indulgences which allowed the faithful to buy remission for the time they would have to spend in purgatory to pay for their sins after death. According to Luther, the Church had degenerated into a bulwark of decadence and corruption. It did not teach the true faith, but had been led astray by the Devil, and all those who supported it were doing the Devil's work (Dixon & Traninger, 2020, p. 337). Luther's criticisms prompted a flood of responses: outraged protests from Catholic figureheads, but also approval from those who shared his concerns. Soon, all of Europe was in turmoil. Debates raged, insults and accusations from both camps flew back and forth, and people were excommunicated or even burned at the stake. The period of religious strife would last for many decades.

One reason Luther and his fellow reformers could spread their ideas so successfully was their use of a relatively new invention: the printing press. Together with a slightly older invention, the woodcut, this allowed them to reproduce texts and images on a scale that had been unheard of in earlier times (Scribner, 1994). Countless books, pamphlets and sermons were printed to attack the Church and make the case for Protestantism. They reached audiences of tens of thousands across Germany and beyond. Many publications combined text with pictures, making heavy use of ridicule and satire to get their point across. As the historians Scott Dixon and Anita Traninger (2020) vividly summarize: "Monks, priests, bishops, and cardinals were reduced to folk caricatures: they appeared as swollen-bellied gluttons, pock-nosed drunkards, sexual predators, grifters, and parasites. Humbling the elevated claims of the Church and its clergy, woodcuts depicted peasants rounding up bishops, cardinals, and popes in hunting nets like wild fowl in the forests and women chasing after monks with pitch forks and grain threshers" (p. 345).

Through such images, the Protestant reformers could present their message in a way that even the illiterate masses could understand. A good example is the pamphlet *Passional Christi und Antichristi* (1521; see Image 2.3), illustrated by Luther's friend



IMAGE 2.2 Portrait of Martin Luther, one of the leading figures of the Protestant Reformation

Source: Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain

and fellow reformer Lucas Cranach the Elder. The work includes thirteen pairs of images on facing pages contrasting the life and deeds of Jesus Christ to those of the popes. They are accompanied by quotations from Scripture and Church law, respectively. On the left-hand page, Jesus is depicted chasing the moneychangers from the temple in Jerusalem; on the right-hand page, the Pope is selling indulgences. Likewise, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, while the Pope has his feet kissed in adoration; Jesus is tortured with a crown of thorns, while the Pope wears a triple tiara; Jesus

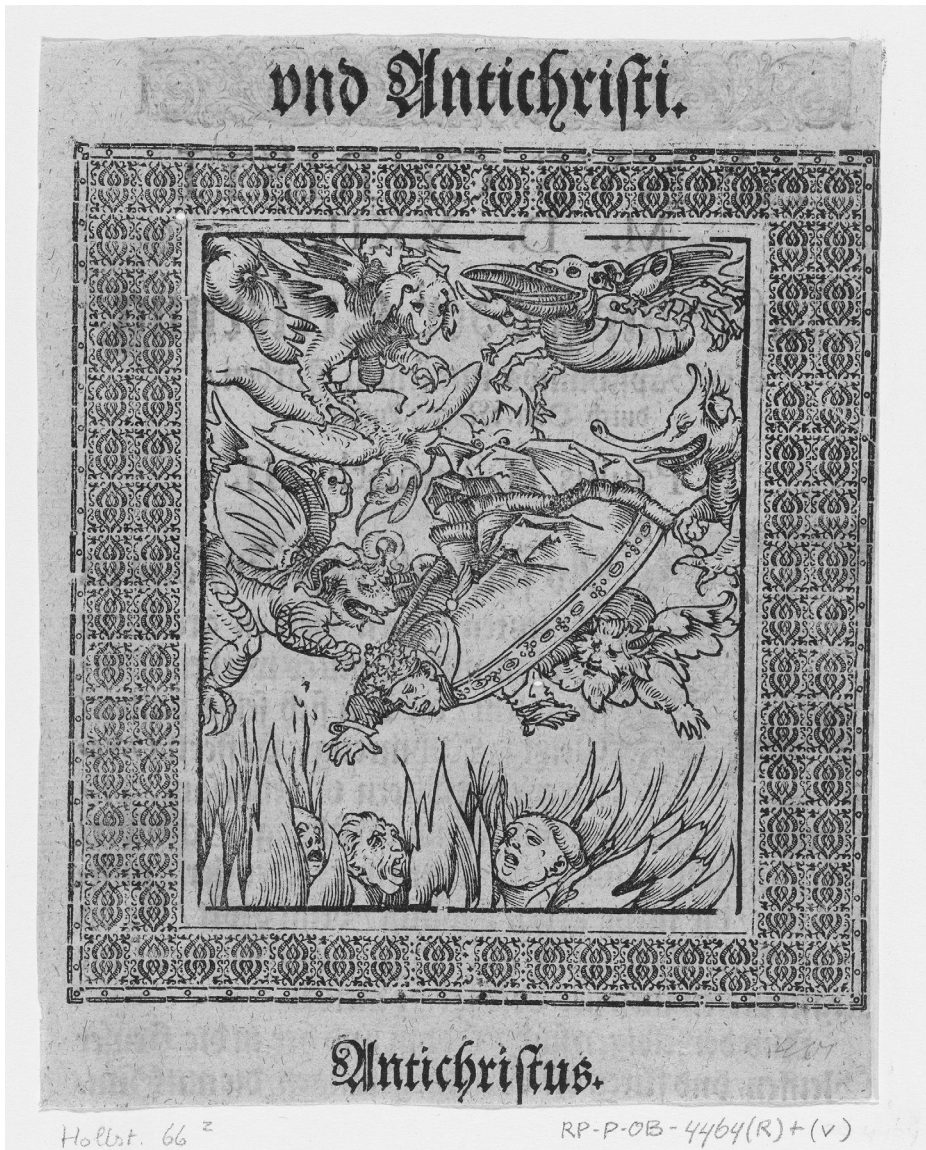


IMAGE 2.3 The Pope tumbles down into hell in this engraving from the *Passional Christi und Antichristi* (1521)

Source: Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Public Domain

stumbles under the weight of the cross, while the Pope is carried in a litter. On and on it goes. The final pair of images shows Jesus ascending to heaven and the Pope falling into the fiery pit of hell (Dykema, 2014, pp. 155–159; Groll, 1990).

The sins of the popes depicted in this pamphlet are rather generic. Clearly, the goal was to condemn the papacy as an institution. However, the images are of recognizable individuals. Twelve of the thirteen pictures show Pope Leo X, who headed the Church

when the pamphlet was published. The thirteenth shows his predecessor, Pope Julius II (Dykema, 2014, p. 158). While much Reformation propaganda targeted the Church, the papacy, and the clergy as a whole, individual Catholic leaders and thinkers frequently came under attack as well. Luther, for instance, launched vicious personal assaults against Catholic theologians, questioning their learning and integrity and addressing them in a derogatory manner. When one of his opponents, Johannes Eck, beat him in a public debate, Luther's supporters responded by publishing *Eckius dedolatus* or "Eck cut down to size," a satirical work portraying the venerable scholar as a raunchy hedonist indulging in the pleasures of baths and taverns (Dixon & Traninger, 2020).

Inevitably, Luther himself also became a target of character attacks. In *Luther's Game of Heresy* (1520/21), the monk is depicted stirring a pot together with the Devil. The flames or vapors rising from the noxious brew are labeled to signify falsehood, unbelief, heresy, blasphemy, and other vices (Scribner, 1994, pp. 229–231). In fact, the Catholic counter-propagandists were employing the same strategy as the Protestant reformers. Both sides reduced complex theological and moral issues to the **"good vs evil"** tactic, a method of presenting an issue or a problem as dichotomy, with two opposite extremes. If Luther was doing God's work, the Pope had to be in league with demonic forces—or vice versa. There was no room for nuance or intermediate positions (Scribner, 1994, p. 242). This is a pattern that we often see emerging throughout history. Time and again, character attacks tend to simplify a complex argument and replace it with a ridicule, mockery, exaggeration, or gross misinterpretations of the targeted individual's behavior and traits.

Without a doubt, the Protestant Reformation was a milestone in the history of character assassination. Character attacks could now reach audiences numbering in the tens or even hundreds of thousands. In a time before the woodcut or the printing press, it is hard to see how an individual like Luther could have done so much damage to a powerful and seemingly infallible institution like the Catholic Church. In addition, these new technologies allowed the visual to play a much bigger role in character attacks than had been the case so far. Cartoons and caricatures have become powerful means to ridicule and discredit public individuals. Their potential was first realized in the time of the Reformation.

These examples of character attacks referred to cases that have taken place hundreds of years ago. Now let's move closer to modern times and consider a U.S. president. Which one? Before you read the following page, try to guess. The name of which former president comes to your mind immediately when you read the following comments about his personality, character, and individual style? Here are just a few of such comments:

"an idiot," "a buffoon," "inefficient," "weak," "coarse," "dishonest," "not equal to the occasion," "universally an admitted failure"; who also makes "silly remarks," and who has a "problem with syntax."

Who is this president? Ready to answer?

When we asked this question to our students in class, most of the answers were, predictably, Donald Trump. Did you have this name in mind initially? In fact, the

correct answer is Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), one of the most admired and revered presidents of the United States. Yes indeed, all these negative words were actual verbal and printed attacks against him during his short presidential campaign and his presidency.

Before we turn to Lincoln, we should mention that this book has quite a few references to Trump and character attacks coming from and against him. Indeed, Trump was an easy target of attacks for many reasons. Yet if anyone thought that Trump was the only president in the history of the United States who was relentlessly attacked, they are mistaken, as you can already see. Practically all presidents were under relentless character attacks in all media outlets available at the time of their presidency. Without further ado, let's turn to the case of President Lincoln.

A CASE OF OPPONENTS TAKING ON A U.S. PRESIDENT

The 1860 presidential campaign was one of the most contentious and divisive in the history of the United States. Four candidates ran for the presidency, and the major political parties were split on ideological, geographic, and cultural grounds. The march toward the Civil War was underway. Abraham Lincoln (see Image 2.4), a former Congressman, was a candidate of the Republican Party. He planned not to expand slavery into new territories and eventually to abolish slavery if he were elected. In addition, his refusal to acknowledge the states' right to secession drew support in the north and rallied the opposition in the south of the country. Some people even pledged to leave the country if Lincoln was elected (Bowden, 2013).

Lincoln did not deliver campaign speeches and relied mostly on his own campaign leaflets, posters, newspaper editorials, and other printed materials. Thousands of his volunteers across America promoted his electoral program and told people Lincoln's biography, emphasizing his humble social background, his work ethic, and a common-sense approach to divisive issues. The opposition did not wait long to respond. Together with boiling political tensions, character attacks against candidate Lincoln became vicious. He was called a hypocrite for shamelessly playing the slavery card to win the election. His height and his physical appearance became a common theme of attacks. The oppositional parties' newspaper called him a "horrid-looking wretch . . . sooty and scoundrelly [*sic*] in aspect; a cross between the nutmeg dealer, the horse-swapper, and the night man." He was cursed in caricatures and pamphlets as an ape, a baboon, a monster, a Negro (a racial term referring to Lincoln, a white man, as a sellout), an idiot, and a buffoon (Smart & Shiraev, 2014).

Such attacks remained as vicious during his presidency. They were coming from newspaper editorials, public speeches, journals, and private letters. Lincoln was constantly ridiculed for his physical appearance and lack of refinement. Comparisons to Robespierre of France and Charles I of England—two once powerful individuals who had been executed by their political opponents—occurred repeatedly and deliberately (Bowden, 2013). Others attacked his personality. The president was called timid, vacillating, and inefficient. His ability to lead was under fire as well. To some he was not up to the occasion because he had "no will, no courage, no executive capacity." Even some

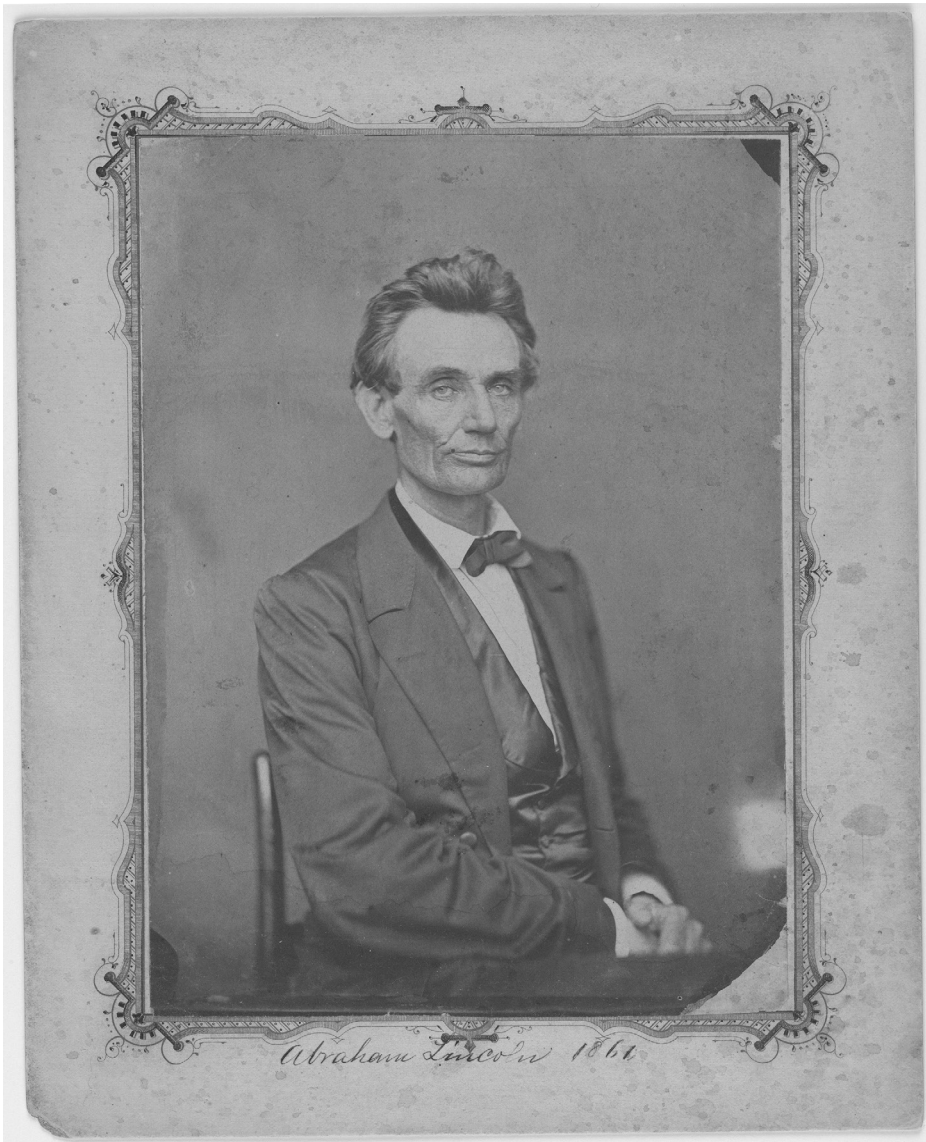


IMAGE 2.4 Widely regarded as an excellent president nowadays, Abraham Lincoln was vigorously attacked by his political opponents at the time

Source: Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain

of his supporters insisted that he was “weak as water.” His speeches—which students these days study as examples of rhetorical brilliance—were called “coarse, colloquial, devoid of ease and grace” as well as devoid of the “simplest rules of syntax.” One critic said about Lincoln’s famous Gettysburg Address: “anything more dull and commonplace wouldn’t be easy to produce” (Burlingame, 2013). The attacks against him did not even stop after his tragic assassination.

What lessons can we take from this case? From the middle of the 19th century, historians and political scientists observe a rapidly increasing role of the media—mostly newspapers at first—in political campaigns and character attacks. An army of journalists and other professionals began to gather, process, and disseminate information in a matter of hours (compare this to royal messengers a few centuries prior). In the United States, local and national newspapers have for many years played an important role in presidential elections. They were largely partisan, which can explain the intensity of their relentless attacks against oppositional candidates. Today, American papers, such as the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*, still declare their support for a particular presidential candidate in advance. Later in the book we will discuss different business models of today’s media and their motivation to engage in character attacks against certain politicians or other leaders. As technology changes, so do business models of mass communication.

The Lincoln case also illustrates that character attacks can come from the target’s own “camp.” This is the first time we mention that attacks can come from family members, friends, and loyal colleagues. Although this may seem surprising at first, it makes sense if you think about it. Some supporters can become disillusioned with certain ideas and change their political beliefs. Others are disappointed with their candidate’s performance, expecting him or her to deliver what had been promised. (Lincoln was often criticized exactly for this.) Yet others can be unpleasantly surprised with the people they previously supported because they changed their behavior. It is also common to explain one’s change of heart by pointing at the faults of other people (“I voted for a different person” or “she promised different things”), and thus it is easy to criticize and even attack them (see Table 2.1).

As we should learn from these cases, history is a demanding teacher. Before using historical examples to help you with a modern case of character assassination, always make sure that you have checked reliable historical information, not just a quote from

TABLE 2.1 A summary of the four cases presented in this chapter

Case	Historic Context	Features of Character Assassination
Pharaoh Akhenaten (ca. 1375-1334 BCE)	Autocratic rule in the Kingdom of Egypt	Vandalism aiming at memory erasing
Marcus Tullius Cicero in 63 BCE	Debate in the Roman Senate	The use of powerful rhetorical attacks against a political opponent
German monk Martin Luther (1483-1546)	Political and theological battles during the Reformation; the use of the printing press	The use of personal attacks to address complex theological and political issues
U.S. President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)	The presidency of the United States; development of modern mass media	A great variety of forms and methods of written insults against a political figure

a popular website that readily proves your point. In fact, you will be better off if you look for historical facts that contradict your initial opinion. Such facts will make you think, discuss, and develop as a person. This is likely to help you to become a critical and valuable observer.

History is also a humble teacher. Not every present-day development has an exact analogy in history. It is tempting to create parallels between modern character attacks by politicians via Twitter and seemingly similar reported attacks by European royals or Chinese emperors from past centuries. Such parallels may appear exciting, but upon further review they can be invalid or misleading. New political and social contexts as well as new technologies allow us to see character attacks in a new light.

History also is a rewarding teacher. Develop critical thinking skills, and you will realize how helpful history is in your life and in your work. “Nothing you can know that isn’t known,” says a classical song by the Beatles. Feel free to disagree and discuss.

Every discussion is supposed to be based on opinions and facts. How do we discover or establish facts in our study of character assassination? This will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Studies of character assassination draw at least three important lessons from history. First, character assassination as a phenomenon has some common (central) features that should appear in all ages and cultures. Second, character assassination also has distinct historical-specific (peripheral) features or characteristics deeply rooted in the concrete historical and cultural aspects of the time. Third, historical parallels are powerful, but they are not 100 percent accurate.
- There are at least two types of mistaken assumptions or cognitive fallacies people frequently make when they read and talk about history. One is their overwhelming reliance on history and the tendency to bring historical analogies to each and every case related to current affairs. The other cognitive fallacy is the total denial of historical lessons.
- Early examples of character assassination come from Ancient Egypt. Akhenaten’s posthumous disgrace is such an early case. His enemies, whoever they were, tried to destroy his status and rejected his place in the line of pharaohs. We consider such actions as character attacks because they are about *memory erasing* or attempts to diminish or even eliminate an individual existence from the collective memory of future generations.
- Ancient Rome took character assassination to a level of sophistication that went well beyond anything we find in Akhenaten’s Egypt. When Cicero was verbally attacking Catiline, he employed many effective rhetorical techniques that are still used today, such as using powerful inflammatory labels, attributing evil intentions to his opponent, inducing fear and anxiety in his audience, and creating a polar opposition between “us” and “them.”
- The Protestant Reformation was a milestone in the history of character assassination. Thanks to the invention of the printing press, character attacks could now

reach audiences numbering in the tens or even hundreds of thousands. The case of Luther demonstrates that the Catholic counter-propagandists were employing the same strategy as the Protestant reformers. Both sides reduced complex theological and moral issues to a black-and-white scheme of “good” versus “evil,” leaving no doubt that they were on the side of good.

- From the middle of the 19th century, historians and political scientists see a rapidly increasing role of the media—mostly newspapers at first—in political campaigns and in character attacks. The case of President Lincoln demonstrates that character attacks against him were deliberate, vicious, and relentless. They were coming from newspaper editorials, public speeches, journals, and private letters. The president was constantly ridiculed for his physical appearance, his lack of refinement, his policies, and his actions. The attacks against him did not even stop after his tragic death.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. At the start of the chapter, we briefly discussed the case of Richard III. Can you think of any other historical characters that are generally regarded as villainous? Why are they considered to be so bad? Can you also think of historical characters that are regarded as heroes by some, but villains by others? Discuss why people reach such radically different judgments about these persons.
2. Find examples from history or literature showing individuals trying to attack or even erase memories of other people to advance their personal agendas. Why do they want to tamper with collective memory? What benefits do they anticipate receiving? How can these tactics backfire, in your view?
3. If one believes that her or his political cause is just, like Cicero did when he attacked Catiline, is it fair to character-attack an opponent who does not share your views? If you believe that your opponent is immoral and wrong (for example, somebody you think is racist or sexist), under what circumstances will it be okay to attack this person’s character verbally or via social media?
4. Martin Luther and his supporters were among the first people to make use of cartoons and caricatures to attack their opponents. In our day and age, cartoons of politicians thrive in newspapers and the online world. Can you find examples of cartoons that go beyond gently poking fun at a person and really damage their reputation? What makes these cartoons so effective as character attacks?
5. As an old saying goes, where there is action, there is a counteraction. Is attacking and ridiculing the character of an authority figure, like Luther’s attacks on the Pope, an effective tactic to achieve political goals in today’s world? Can it be that ridiculing other people’s character only irritates and angers their supporters and thus makes them resolve to fight back with more determination? Consider these questions from both sides of character attacks: attackers and their targets.
6. Abraham Lincoln was viciously attacked during his lifetime, yet today his reputation is universally positive. Why did the character attacks against him not “stick”? What allows some historical characters to rise above the barbs of their detractors, while the reputations of others are tarnished forever?

KEY TERMS

- “Good vs evil” tactic** A method of presenting an issue or a problem as dichotomy, with a “good” and “evil” side as two opposite extremes.
- Memory erasing** Attempts to diminish or even eliminate an individual existence from the collective memory of future generations.
- Protected classes** In the United States, groups of individuals protected, according to federal law, from discrimination or harassment; such categories include sex, race, age, disability, color, creed, national origin, religion, or genetic information.
- Silencing** Preventing a living person from defending his or her character, after it has been attacked or erased from printed or other sources.

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Approaches to and Methodology for Studying Character Assassination

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Introduce key research approaches to study character assassination.
- Introduce and critically discuss major research methods.
- Outline major practical applications of research methodology.
- Outline the necessity of critical thinking to overcome research bias of studies into character assassination.

It is not unusual to read professional commentaries that the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections departed from the “norm.” While elections in the United States usually feature perfectly coiffed candidates spouting their carefully rehearsed talking points during judiciously organized events, in 2016, few contenders for the Republican or Democratic nomination seemed to fit that bill. Many Americans remember how in 2016 “anti-establishment” candidates proclaimed their difference from these norms, in their appearance (Bernie Sanders’s rumpled avuncularity, for instance), their likeability (Ted Cruz’s outsider jerkiness), and their professionalism (Donald Trump’s shoot-from-the-hip style). In 2020, both major candidates and their supporting teams from the get-go dived into straightforward verbal attacks against each other. The 2020 election campaign was perhaps the most extreme version of an “ad hominem election,” spurred by personal attacks, especially by Donald Trump. (*Ad hominem*, as you should remember from Chapter 1, is a Latin expression for a response directed against a person rather than a view or position they hold.) The power of several social media platforms—Twitter and Facebook in particular—aided most attacks in both elections: the candidates and citizens could voice their opinions without the vetting of professional speechwriters and image consultants. As a result, using sports terminology, the

2016 and 2020 elections should go down in history as a great double-header—or back-to-back events—that produced a plethora of facts to study character assassination.

But wait. . . Why were these elections so special? What was that special element that made character attacks “stand out” and appear different from the attacks during other electoral seasons? How do we gain reliable knowledge when we study character attacks? How do we establish facts and distinguish them from mere opinions? To answer these questions, we will turn to methods and approaches to study character assassination.

METHODS TO STUDY CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

Powerful emotional assessments of an event coming from an eyewitness or a catchy headline are just expressions of people’s opinions about this event. The study of character assassination requires the use of the scientific method, which employs careful research procedures to provide reliable and verifiable evidence. This method is about critically testing, measuring, and checking the information, rather than simply generating an opinion, believing in something, or uncritically accepting the news. Modern research disciplines rely on the scientific method and apply it based on each discipline’s focus and tradition. In this chapter we will outline several such fields, including communication studies, social sciences, and political psychology. Some other fields have been already introduced in the book: Chapter 2 emphasizes the historic approach. Other approaches will be described later in other chapters.

Research into character assassination is also rooted in specific investigative procedures involving quantitative and qualitative kinds. Quantitative research is about systematic investigation of behavioral or psychological phenomena by means of statistical or mathematical data and various computational techniques. This research involves detection, recording, measurement, classification, assessment, and interpretation of data. You can, for example, count the number of postings or tweets, tally the critical words in an interview, or measure people’s opinions about an issue in a national poll.

In the 2016 elections, quantitative research showed the relative power of social media in spreading opinions. Twitter was particularly noticeable in the political debate surrounding the election. Because of Twitter’s 280-character limit, users could effectively craft soundbites for news channels and broader circulation. And circulate tweets did! A 2016 study of Twitter analyzed viral tweets in the last 68 days of the election. They found that two-thirds of such tweets were praising Trump or attacking Clinton (Rossman, 2017). Additionally, numbers showed that more of Trump’s tweets praised himself than attacked Clinton, whereas Clinton’s tweets were more likely to attack Trump than they were to praise her own actions or political record. Thus, it seems clear that Trump won the Twitter wars pretty handily during the election. Despite Trump spending fewer tweets attacking his opponent, his attack tweets got more re-tweets than Clinton’s (Rossman, 2017; see Image 3.1). The most re-tweeted message supporting Clinton was from talk-show host Jerry Springer, who said “Hillary Clinton belongs in the White House. Donald Trump belongs on my show.” From the quantitative view, Trump had a much broader reach on Twitter, and his known style of tweeting in all capital letters was widely mimicked.



IMAGE 3.1 Donald Trump's campaigning style included many character attacks

Source: Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead

Qualitative research does not involve measurement or statistical procedures. Qualitative procedures study variables that are difficult to measure, such as the subject or theme of rumors and jokes about a public official, or the meaning of a newspaper editorial's sarcastic remarks about a foreign leader. There are also many other situations in which typical standardized measures involving numbers and percentages are not suited or unavailable. Imagine you do archival research and want to examine the style and tone of political caricatures in France from 19th century pamphlets or from 1990s caricatures. In such case, qualitative methods such as rhetorical criticism, explored in more depth later in this chapter, become suitable.

Qualitative methods involve **case studies**, which are detailed examinations of a particular event, person, or group. A reliable case study tends to be comprehensive, verifiable, and based on several sources of information. Case studies have become common in character assassination research because they often can illustrate vivid factual materials. Whether these facts represent a stable pattern or tendency can be determined by the analysis of other cases. To illustrate, on October 7, 2016, the *Washington Post* released a report and a 2005 video detailing Donald Trump, then a reality television star, essentially admitting to sexually assaulting women and describing Trump's pursuit of married women (Neuman, 2017). This report emerged merely weeks before the election. In response, Trump issued a video apology. Although many people were shocked by these revelations in the report, the condemnations came mostly from Trump's fierce opponents. Polling numbers among Trump supporters remained largely unchanged (Roller, 2016). This case shows that character attacks against an individual—although such attacks are based on facts—may not substantially change the opinions of this individual's supporters. Of course, other cases may show a different pattern of responses.

Self-reports, as a qualitative method, bring valuable research data too. A classic book, *Character Assassination*, written by Jerome Davis (1950) more than 70 years ago, is in fact a case log of observations about how the writer's character was attacked over the years of his public career. Self-reports can be solicited and unsolicited written opinions, letters, posted comments, emails, and private diaries. Researchers must implement safeguards to protect the confidentiality of their sources.

Quantitative and qualitative methods often overlap. Take questionnaires, for example. Questionnaires as self-report methods typically consist of several statements for a person to evaluate or a list of statements or questions to answer. A person can be asked, for instance, whether she has been character attacked in the past or whether such attacks have made an impact on her. For decades, this method has been dominant in communication studies, social sciences, and psychology to investigate the impact of newspaper articles, radio reports, or television news on people's attitudes and their voting choices. Today, these methods are increasingly computerized.

The most well-known and widely used method of self-reporting is public **opinion surveys** or polls, which are usually a series of questions designed to measure the opinions of a population. People give their opinions—among hundreds of topics—about political candidates, their skills, and their character. Polls also show the dynamics of public opinion, or whether people's views of candidates change over time, especially right before the elections.

One of the common and effective methods of studying messages and communication is **content analysis**. This is a research method that systematically organizes and summarizes both the manifest (what was actually said or written) and latent (the meaning of what was said and written) content of communication. The researcher usually examines transcripts of conversations or interviews, postings, letters, articles, caricatures, and other forms of communication.

And finally, **experimental methods** allow researchers to provide insight into the dynamics of character assassination by demonstrating that a certain outcome occurs when a particular variable is changed or manipulated by the researcher. Experiments should give the researcher transparent and verifiable procedures; not only do they ask individuals about, for example, how they would respond in theory to a particular

LET'S DISCUSS

Among the most remarkable cases of the measured impact of character attacks is the 1988 Willie Horton case. This is a classical story, which in the minds of many Americans has affected the outcome of the presidential elections between Vice President George Bush and Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. The story received almost unprecedented national publicity after the Republican campaign prepared a short television ad telling a story of a person named Willie Horton, a convicted killer who had gotten a lawful weekend release from prison in Massachusetts when Dukakis was governor. During this brief release, Horton had raped a woman and stabbed a man. Even though the furlough policy had been initiated by Dukakis's Republican predecessor, the Bush campaign set out aggressively to tie this case to Dukakis and his "soft-on-crime" policies. The ad was aired in September attacking Dukakis as being a "softie." Public opinions showed a dramatic 7–8-point shift of opinions rejecting Dukakis and supporting Bush (Shirayev & Sobel, 2006). Of course, there is little evidence to suggest that the character attack on Dukakis was the only cause of the opinion shift, but most experts, including Dukakis himself, believed this ad played a very important role in his defeat in 1988 (Benson, 2012).

Could you suggest other cases in which a negative ad or a character attack against a public figure has substantially affected the public opinion related to this individual? Why were some of such attacks effective while others were not? Suggest the conditions that in your view can affect the effectiveness of character attacks.

character attack; the researchers can see how the participants actually respond in an experimental situation and what effect such attacks actually had.

Research is always inseparable from research ethics, which concerns moral issues involving human subjects, the researcher's ethical conduct, and the overall well-being of every person involved in a particular study.

So far, we have learned only some basic information about research methods for studying character assassination. We will deal with a variety of these and other methods later in the book. Meanwhile, we are turning now to various perspectives from which character assassination is examined in modern science.

THE RHETORIC AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

One of the book's authors, Jennifer Keohane, studies character assassination from the rhetorical perspective. She maintains, as do other communication scholars, that because so many character attacks take place during political debates, or in millions of interactions conveyed via tweets and other social media postings—these attacks

and their outcomes can be understood and studied as a communication phenomenon. Communication, however, is an extremely broad field, and there are lots of different approaches within this discipline, as we will see in this discussion.

From the view of rhetoric, character assassination is an act of communication. Moreover, this is a strategic act, often designed to accomplish a particular goal. As such, character assassination can be a rhetorical strategy! Before we discuss why that is, we should provide a definition of **rhetoric**. Rhetoric is an ancient Greek term that dates to Aristotle (384–322 BCE; see Image 3.2). In Aristotle's formation, rhetoric is "the ability, in any given case, to see the available means of persuasion." In simpler terms, this means that rhetoric is about adapting persuasive symbols (like words or images) to specific situations (Keith & Lundberg, 2008, pp. 3–4). Rhetoricians, or scholars of rhetoric, analyze how strategic communicators adapt their messages to accomplish their goals. Based on what you have already read, it should be clear, then, that character assassination is deeply rhetorical.

It is worth returning to Aristotle's definition of rhetoric to investigate the phrase "in any given case." You have already read about the importance of historical, political, and social contexts for character assassination. The differences in these contexts indicate that attacks that may work in some cultures or contexts may fail or even backfire and harm the attacker in others. You have also encountered the fourth pillar of character assassination—the audience. While rhetoricians are in tune with the context of the communication they analyze, they also investigate how communicators attempt to reach particular audiences, which can differ in many ways. In the United States, attacking a candidate for office for having an "F" grade from the National Rifle Association

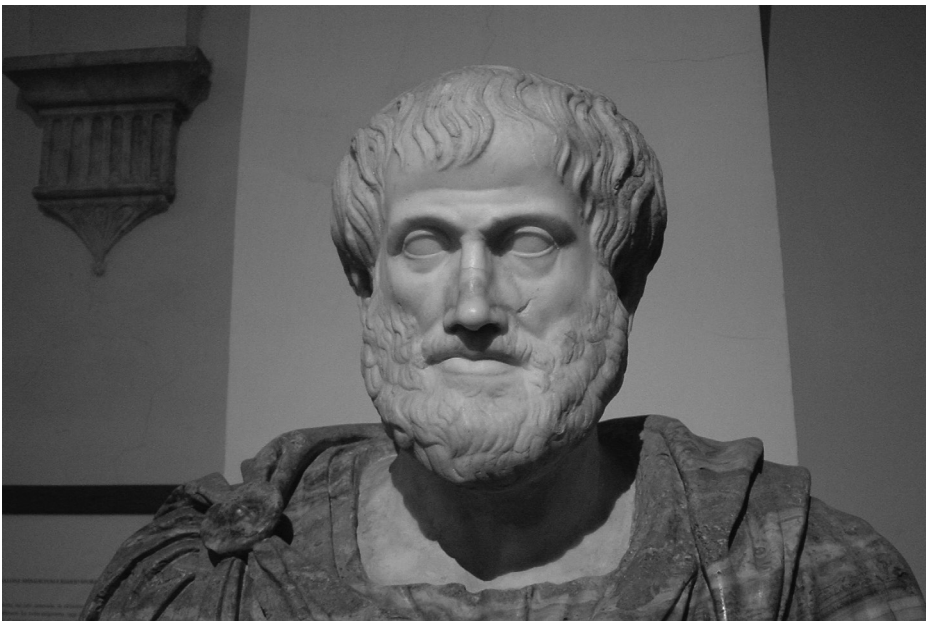


IMAGE 3.2 Aristotle is considered the father of modern rhetorical studies

Source: Ludovisi Collection, Photo courtesy of Giovanni Dall'Orto

(the association gives members of Congress a grade ranging from A to F that reflects their voting records on gun rights) may be persuasive to Republican voters who own guns but may actually persuade other voters to support this candidate!

Rhetoric has some other concepts that may be helpful to those trying to analyze and understand character assassination. Aristotle identified three modes of proof or ways to persuade an audience—ethos, logos, and pathos (Keith & Lundberg, 2008, p. 7). While entire books have been written about each of these terms, in short, *ethos* refers to the speaker's credibility. *Logos* refers to the logical flow and construction of the message, and *pathos* refers to emotional appeals (see Table 3.1).

It is perhaps easy to see that all three of these proofs working together can make for a strong message. All three are also relevant to character attacks—audiences may be less persuaded by an attack that does not have logical proof behind it, like sources cited. Attack ads during political elections that cite a candidate's voting record are good examples of building logos in character assassination. Likewise, many character attacks strive to generate knee-jerk emotional reactions to messages—a clear use of pathos. Ethos, however, is especially important! We have mentioned the significance of the attacker and their credibility as well before, but rhetoricians spend a lot of time talking about credibility of speakers. If an attacker cannot convince the audience that they are a credible source of the attack, the audience may not be persuaded and may even come to have a lower view of the attacker! There are a lot of different ways to build credibility and how to best do so varies by the channel the attacker is using for the communication.

Some rhetorical scholars classify character attacks as a form of *ad hominem* argument (Keith & Lundberg, 2008, p. 48)—attacking the person instead of the substance of their argument—a definition from Chapter 1. These scholars in textbooks about argumentation and rhetoric often include *ad hominem* attacks on lists of logical fallacies, or flaws in logos that should not be used in debate. We see it differently. Character attacks are often an effective, strategic, and reasonable rhetorical tactic to deploy. We can still, of course, classify character attacks for their quality and how well the attacker crafts their ethos, pathos, and logos.

Now let's talk about how rhetorical scholars *do* their research. While you might not be an expert in rhetoric after this section, you will at least have a rhetorical vocabulary

TABLE 3.1 Aristotle's ethos, logos, and pathos applied to character attacks

Mode of Persuasion	Characteristics of the Mode
Ethos	Refers to the communicator's credibility. If an attacker cannot convince the audience that they are a credible source of the attack, the audience may not be persuaded.
Logos	Refers to the logical flow and construction of the message. The message in a character attack should contain logical or other cohesive arguments to be effective.
Pathos	Refers to emotional appeals. A message should stir emotions in the audience; such emotional states should help the communicator to achieve their goals.

that you can apply to character attacks that you want to analyze. So, rhetoricians study persuasion. How? Well, the first thing they have to do is find a text. A text is any type of persuasive interaction. We call them texts because they traditionally referred to a written transcript of a speech. Today, rhetoricians can study everything from speeches and movies to music and images. A text could be a meme, a video, or the lyrics of a song. The key idea is that the rhetorician has to identify the unit they are studying. Next, the rhetorician will typically research the context. They may use news reports or other sources to find out who was in the audience, what the goal for the message was, and when and where it was delivered or aired.

Once a rhetorician has a good sense of the context, they then turn to analyzing the text itself. Rhetoricians move beyond summarizing what a text says to trying to figure out how it does persuasive work. In other words, rhetoricians are not reporters but analysts, developing their own interpretation of a text. Ethos, pathos, and logos are concepts that can help a rhetorician in their analysis, but in general, rhetoricians try to answer the question “what makes this text persuasive?”

Let’s take a look at a quick example from the 2016 election that will show how rhetoricians analyze texts related to character attacks. Let’s use campaign advertisements—one from the Trump campaign and one from the Clinton campaign—as our texts. Each ad features a central discussion of character, making them relevant to the study of character attacks. First, the Clinton campaign released a thirty second spot on September 26 entitled “Mirrors” (Clinton, 2016; see Image 3.3). The central purpose of the ad was to build on conversations about Trump’s lack of fitness for office by calling attention to his long history of misogynist commentary. The ad builds pathos with an opening shot of Clinton hugging a girl that appears to be around 10 years old. It also uses soft piano music. The ad intersperses images of young women looking dissatisfied as they brush their hair or stand before mirrors with clips of Trump sharing feelings about women. In the first clip, Trump says, “I’d look her right in that fat, ugly face of hers” before going on to say things like “She’s a slob” and “She ate like a pig.” Some of the Trump quotes would have been familiar to viewers paying attention to the election, as they emerged as news stories. The ad appears credible as it has a high production value in smooth transitions between shots, and it uses video and audio that viewers can confirm come from Trump. Thus, viewers can credibly know that he actually said the things the Clinton campaign is accusing him of saying. At the 27-second mark, the screen fades to black and white text asks, “Is this the president we want for our daughters?” The ad appeals to parents across the United States, as it takes aim at Trump’s moral character. The ad never says this overtly, but its logical construction implies that Trump’s lack of respect for women would make him an unfit president. Thus, in its combination of ethos, pathos, and logos, the ad “Mirrors” targets an audience of parents asking them to judge Trump’s character and find it wanting, and as a result, not vote for him. Next, let’s look at an ad from the Trump campaign.

At a speech in September 2016, Clinton infamously called Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables” and then listed why she felt that to be the case: “they’re racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, you name it.” The Trump campaign seized that line and ran an ad called “Deplorable” (2016). Most of the ad showed Clinton delivering her speech, credibly illustrating that she had in fact made this



IMAGE 3.3 As she campaigned, Hillary Clinton portrayed Donald Trump as disrespectful toward women

Source: Photo by Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 3.0

declaration. About halfway through, the footage switched to people at Trump rallies, and the voiceover said, “people like you, you, and you, deplorable.” These images built pathos, showing folks waving American flags and invited an audience of Trump supporters to identify with the named “you.” They were invited to feel upset at being called this slur. The screen faded to black as white text read and the voiceover echoed, “You

know what's deplorable? Hillary Clinton viciously demonizing hard-working people like you." The ad's central rhetorical strategy was to make people feel personally part of the group that Clinton had attacked. They were then intended to see her as aloof and out of touch with concerns of ordinary Americans. This ad helped Trump build his own ethos as an ordinary American despite the fact that he is very rich. It appeared though that this ad gave Clinton too much visibility, it was carefully targeted to reach an audience of people who felt like they were being left behind rapid economic and social changes.

It should be clear that both Clinton and Trump were targeting specific audiences and adapted the strategies in their ads to do just that as they attacked the other's character. While this is just a brief example of rhetorical analysis, it should give you a taste of how rhetoricians analyze texts and how concepts like ethos, logos, and pathos can help illuminate the strategies that underlie character attacks. Thinking about audience can also help scholars determine whether an attack was successful. But rhetoric is only one lens that scholars can look through to analyze character attacks.

THE SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Sergei A. Samoilenko, as a co-author of this textbook, studies character assassination from the sociocultural perspective. It is based on the social science tradition, which examines human behavior from the standpoint of society and the relationships among individuals within it. Character assassination here is the process and the product of social interaction among various actors. If rhetoricians mainly focus on the production and delivery of messages in attacks and defenses, sociologists for the most part study how the patterns of interaction between two or among several people can be explained by norms and cultural ties within social groups and societal institutions. There are several building blocks that guide the sociocultural approach to character assassination research.

First, character assassination is perceived as a *process of interaction* among various agents, including the attacker, the target, the media, and multiple active audiences. Supporters of this perspective are not necessarily interested in individual actions (although they study them), but rather want to understand how different actors create various outcomes of character assassination: scandals, reputational crises, cultural transitions, or electoral victories. A character attack against a public figure (for example, an accusation of dishonesty) can cause a massive scandal under one set of circumstances but will produce no impact in other cases, under another set of circumstances. Therefore, character assassination can be seen—especially in the modern era of communication—as a complex transaction among interconnected individuals and groups who act according to social rules. These rules change in different historical or cultural contexts. In Communist China in the 1950s and later, it was prescribed for party officials to appear modest, humble, and disinterested in material goods. During numerous government shakeups and purges, those who were persecuted were often publicly accused of being immodest, greedy, and materialistic (Yang, 2020).

Second, a crucial element of the sociocultural approach is the focus on the relational nature of communication. The process of social interaction is possible when it

meets two basic requirements: *interdependence* and *intersubjectivity* of social actors. Two or more people are interdependent when they share a mutual concern or compete for a goal, like during elections. People become interdependent when the actions of one person affect the actions of others. A character attack on a candidate from an opponent can expectedly cause a reciprocal attack from the other side. **Intersubjectivity** refers to the ability of social actors to develop understanding and shared meaning via communication with other members of society. Thus, an attack effort is usually successful when it becomes jointly produced or supported by members of the same cultural or social group that share similar beliefs, ideas, or expectations. In 2020, Trump frequently called Biden “sleepy Joe,” likely assuming that Trump’s supporters would be enthused by this insulting reference to Biden’s age. On the other hand, Biden often labeled Trump a “clown,” presumably in hopes to gain support among Biden’s followers who gladly accepted this mocking label and used it against Trump.

Third, the sociocultural perspective examines the individual’s **social identity**—or a sense who we are as members of social groups such as gender, ethnicity, occupation, social class, etc. A person can have an identity or a view of self as a daughter, a university student, a socially active individual, and a great athlete. However, in the context of character attacks, other people can judge this woman’s character through her actions and words and then make their judgements about her reputation as a daughter, a student, an athlete, etc. Our reputation depends on an immediate and volatile single judgment as well as on public opinion, which is a relatively stable social phenomenon. To damage the reputation of others, character attackers essentially invest in strategies to influence public opinion. In the same fashion, people who become targets of character assassination tend to appeal to public opinion to defend their reputation. They can also ignore character attacks if they believe that public opinion has not been affected.

Social groups are held together through common ethnic and ideological linkages. This means that individuals who do not share or support the same distinct values and virtues are perceived by ingroup members as radically different. Thus, practices of favoring ingroup members over outgroup members or *intergroup favoritism* are directly related to the character assassination (Taylor & Doria, 1981). People tend to downplay character attacks against those individuals who they like or support. On the other hand, **scapegoating** is a common practice in intergroup behavior based on excessive singling out a person or group for unjustified criticisms or blame. For example, in 1917 in the United States, a wave of anti-German hysteria was incited by the press openly attacking German American churches, schools, societies, and newspapers as agents of German conspiracy. It caused hostility toward all things German, including the persecution of Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites, because not only many of their members shared German identity but they were also generally opposed to war and military mobilization (Homan, 1994).

Finally, the sociocultural approach puts a strong emphasis on *culture* and *context* (we turn to a more detailed discussion of culture in Chapter 9). Social interaction creates cultural norms and conventions. In turn, culture is a foundation for new contexts and further interaction. For example, public debates about political candidates are common during elections. Liberal democracies involve a competitive party system that requires political candidates to persuade the public of their legitimacy while calling

into question the reputation and good name of their rivals, thereby undermining in some ways their power. In the political field, character assassination has historically and expectedly been one of the most popular tools of persuasion during the election season. An electoral campaign, a pageant, or any competitive selection procedure provide favorable conditions for character attacks (Walton, 1999).

Let's put the sociocultural perspective to work analyzing an example from the 2016 election. On October 30, 2016, a Twitter post by an alleged New York lawyer claimed that the authorities had discovered a child sex ring linked to some members of the Democratic Party. A rumor soon spread on social media claiming that Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton was involved. The rumor originated from 4chan.org, a website known for anonymous posting, then circulated via Facebook and Twitter, and finally, went viral. In the first five weeks, the story was shared on social media about 1.4 million times (Robb, 2017). Soon after, WikiLeaks published hacked emails of John Podesta, then campaign chairman for Clinton. In one email, Podesta was invited to a fundraiser at Comet Ping Pong, a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. Many Internet audiences soon believed that the restaurant was the headquarters of the purported child sex ring. The owner and employees of the pizza restaurant soon became the targets of repeated harassment. On December 4, 2016, a stranger entered the restaurant and fired an assault rifle, claiming he wanted to investigate the story himself. He had read about the alleged ring online and also heard about it from far-right radio shows. Soon it was discovered that the story about the sex ring was fake. Yet this fake story has generated a conspiracy theory implying the involvement of a presidential candidate.

This example demonstrates that character assassination is a "joint product" involving many social actors. The conspiracy theory gained strength within an online networked community, motivated Clinton's adversaries, and outraged her supporters. Finally, a violent action in a pizza restaurant took place caused by the false information. The scandal was also evolving in the context of an ongoing social conflict between two competing political ideologies within a deeply polarized society. An ideological confrontation between conservatives and progressives manifested itself via a spike of incivility in public discourse during the 2020 elections. The political climate was characterized by low trust in many traditional authorities, including political institutions and the media (Gottfried et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2020).

Sociologists show that conspiracy theories become more effective in hurting someone's reputation during times of turmoil or uncertainty (Oliver & Wood, 2014). Scholars connect the strength of people's belief in conspiracy (be it a foreign government or a domestic force) to threatening social conditions, including economic stress, social change, and deep partisan polarization (DiGrazia, 2017). Conspiracy theories also serve as a convenient platform to launch character attacks: it becomes a relatively easy task to associate a presidential candidate's character with current uncertainties and difficulties. In 2020, both presidential candidates were frequently attacked by their opponents as extremely self-centered and selfish during the pandemic time.

In sum, sociocultural analysis views character assassination as a process of social interaction and examines the interdependence of key actors and their ability to produce meanings across small social groups and large networks. These actors and their actions should be examined through the prism of interconnected social and cultural contexts.

THE POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

Political psychology is a research discipline that examines complex interactions between the world of politics on the one hand and people's experiences and behaviors, on the other. Politics influences people's ideas and actions. People's experiences and individual decisions influence politics. Character assassination often involves individual cases as well as trends in political contexts. Therefore, political psychology's resources, as researchers believe, can help in studying such cases and explaining them.

Since the inception of this scholarly discipline in the early 1960s, political psychology has been an interdisciplinary field using research methods and explanatory models from social sciences and communication studies and also developing its own. Political psychologists studying character assassination tend to focus on several questions.

What motivates an individual to attack another person's character? It is generally assumed that the attacker's actions are mostly rational and pursue a practical goal. Political psychologists do not rule out, however, that individuals sometimes turn to personal attacks spontaneously, under the influence of emotions. For example, do some of us from time to time call some people bad names when we feel frustrated? Do we later regret our actions? In other cases, we can see a severe psychological disturbance as a motivation to attack. Think of an attack motivated by someone's grief or anger. Yet in most other cases, a person's motivation to attack reflects the attacker's rational plan and desire to harm the reputation of the target in the eyes of the public (see Chapter 1). The attack should diminish, shatter, or even destroy the target's chances to succeed in a political campaign, a business endeavor, a professional career, or all of the above. Opponents of Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign and later repeatedly hinted that he was a Muslim and that he was hiding this secret identity. John McCain, his opponent, during the same campaign, was accused of fathering an illegitimate child with a black woman some years ago. These allegations were untrue (Obama is Christian, and McCain had legally adopted a girl from Bangladesh), as we mentioned in Chapter 1, but the attacks caught the attention of many. For example, it was likely no help to Obama that even in 2012, according to polls, 4 out of 10 Americans said they could not identify his religion (Newport, 2012).

It must be noted, however, that a target of character attacks is not necessarily and always an innocent individual falling under the barrage of the attacker's lies. Some attacks may be completely untrue while others are based on facts, as you already know. Who then becomes a target and a victim of character assassination? What are the typical conditions under which a person is character attacked? Political psychologists outline several ideas.

Social Status

The victim of attacks can be an individual who has already achieved a social status or an important social position of power or reputation. It can be a government post, a noticeable media presence, or even a place in the Church hierarchy. For instance, Pope Benedict XVI (b. 1927) during his tenure between 2005 and 2013 faced accusations about being a Nazi sympathizer in his youth. American comedian Bill Maher in 2008

and actress Susan Sarandon in 2011 called the pope a “Nazi” as they were lashing out at the Catholic Church under his guidance.

The attackers neglected the fact that almost every boy in Germany in the 1930s was essentially required to join the Hitler Youth—a Nazi Party organization.

Public Competition

The person who is attacked is engaged in a political or other type of competition requiring other people’s support or approval. An electoral campaign, a pageant, or any tournament should provide favorable conditions for character attacks. Character assassination is the ultimate goal of the attacker, because it eliminates a target’s chances of success. Former U.S. Senator George Allen of Virginia during his reelection campaign in 2006 snubbed a reporter of an Asian Indian descent “macaca” (similar to the French word “macaque”). Allen’s opponents immediately noticed this racist remark and repeatedly stated that his verbal blunder reflected Allen’s deep-seated prejudice against minorities. It is difficult to measure with precision the effectiveness of character attacks, but in Allen’s case such attacks coincided with his substantial drop in the polls in a very tight race, and his subsequent defeat in the elections two months later.

Professional Accomplishments

A target of character assassination is usually successful in a professional field such as business, science, teaching, or an art. If one is socially or professionally successful or productive, this is often a convenient context for character attacks. They usually have little to do with the target’s scientific or artistic input, but rather with their missteps in private life or other perceived character liabilities. The famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was frequently accused during his life of being a “pervert” and “sex maniac.” Indeed, Freud in his works published in the 19th and early 20th centuries emphasized the role of human sexuality in people’s emotional problems. Yet sex was also a delicate and often forbidden subject within the conservative culture in Europe of that time. Freud’s scientific interest in human sexuality served as a suitable excuse for his opponents to launch persistent character attacks against one of the most famous world psychiatrists. If he were not famous, the attackers would have not paid any significant attention to him (Gay, 2006).

Association

Every person is vulnerable to character attacks if he or she represents an ideology, scientific theory, social or political cause, political party, or social movement. In these cases, the attackers attempt to weaken and trivialize the ideas for which the target stands or stood in the past. Another goal is to diminish future support and the number of followers. Some critics of communism have long emphasized that Vladimir Lenin, the most prominent leader of the Russian communist revolution, had in his youth contracted syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease, which hastened his death in 1924. Others focused on his crankiness, cheapness, and envy (Solzhenitsyn, 1976). Whether these accusations and allusions were true is almost impossible to establish with certainty

TABLE 3.2 The reasons behind character attacks: the fallouts

Goal of the attacks	Expected fallouts
Sway the undecided	Trying to sway a proportion of undecided voters or decision makers. The best way to do this is often to use a scare tactic: try to convince the undecided that if the other side wins, something terrible will happen to everyone.
Create uncertainty	By creating psychological uncertainty among decision makers, the attacker tries to weaken the opponents and attract positive attention.
Prevent defections	The purpose of character attacks against opponents is to secure your supporters by leading them to see other, rival candidates or individuals as a threat.

today, but this is rather unimportant in this case. Diehard communists will reject any critical comments about their ideological idol. Anti-communists, on the other hand, are likely to welcome such character attacks.

Political psychologists also explain what psychological mechanisms character attackers take into consideration when they launch their attacks. Several psychological models explain the reasons behind character attacks and the expected fallouts of such attacks (see Table 3.2).

“Sway the undecided” is the first reason. In most conflicts involving an observing public, both sides of this conflict concentrate on trying to sway a proportion of undecided voters. The best way to do this often is to use a scare tactic: try to convince the undecided that if the other side wins, something terrible will happen to everyone. A character attack might not change the minds of the target’s supporters but could influence the attitudes and behavior of the undecided (Riker, 1996). Research showed that politicians increase their chances of being elected by making exaggerated claims about the benefits that everyone will receive if these politicians win. On the other hand, they should decrease their opponents’ electoral chances if they exaggerate the bad consequences of their opponents’ victory (Davis & Ferrantino, 1996). Character assassination in this case could be an effective way to excite, alarm, or scare some voters and sway them into a desirable course of action, such as voting or not voting. This model also explains why the winners can get away with slandering their opponents: very often the opponents cannot respond to the slander. That is why attacking late public figures and associating them with an incumbent may be effective. As we pointed out earlier, “since it was a risky business to antagonize living emperors, critics usually aimed their arrows at those rulers who were safely dead” (Icks, 2014, p. 83).

“Create uncertainty” is the next reason. The attacks under such a premise can be very effective during electoral races (Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995). By creating psychological uncertainty among decision makers, the attacker tries to weaken the opponents and attract positive attention. If one candidate leads with wide margins and believes she or he is able to win without converting those who support the opponent, the front-runner typically engages in more positive, and less negative, campaigning than his opponent. On the other hand, if the competition is tight, the front-runner will be motivated to try to “convert” the rival’s supporters. In the three-candidate variant of the model, typical in many countries, or during the U.S. primaries, when several

candidates from the same party compete for nomination, the best strategy is to attack the leader. Because no candidate will attack the weaker rival, attacks should be directed against the front-runner. The primary campaigns in the United States in 2008, 2012, 2015–2016, and 2019–2020 showed that the leading candidates (John McCain, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden) were under intense personal attacks from their opponents in their own political camp! Such attacks might have appeared as self-destructive (and some of them probably were because they undermined the party's unity), but they were probably driven, as political psychology explains, by the desire to create uncertainty among the voters and increase the attacker's own chances to get noticed.

"Prevent defections" is the third reason why people launch attacker attacks. Where the individuals stand in terms of their ideology and political values also matters in the effectiveness of character attacks (Doron & On, 1983). Whereas favorable self-presentation is intended to strengthen the loyalty of your supporters, the purpose of character attacks against opponents is to secure your supporters by leading them to see other, rival candidates as a threat. Attacking requires careful targeting: you have to attack those who may eventually "entice" and "steal" your own supporters. The selective character attack in this case has two functions: it may make the other person unattractive to potential deserters from your camp, and it may affect floating voters of other parties or candidates to come to your support. In simple terms, "shake the closest tree with the most apples so that they will fall quickly."

Why do some character attacks become effective and others do not? It all depends on specific circumstances as well as on individuals and their psychological features. To summarize, the models explaining why and how character attacks work suggest the following: character attacks are effective because they take public support away from the targets by discouraging the targets' supporters and encouraging their opponents. Historic facts and experimental studies provide some validation for that statement. People launching character attacks reasonably expect to be successful if they have enough people believe in what the attacks convey. Most character attackers try to create an imaginary link between their targets' alleged inappropriate behavior on the one hand, and their seemingly good reputation on the other. If a character attack is effective, such a link is established, thus creating an unpleasant emotional state in the witnesses.

Nevertheless, it remains a challenge to determine who, when, under what circumstances, and to what degree becomes most susceptible to the observed character attacks. Studying the contents and methods of character assassination in history and today may provide some answers to these questions.

This chapter introduced character assassination as an interdisciplinary field of scholarly inquiry. After identifying overarching approaches to doing research, it surveyed three academic perspectives that have insights on character assassination research: rhetoric, a sociocultural perspective, and political psychology. The chapter identified how these approaches might analyze different episodes in this election cycle. Keep in mind, though, that there are other scholarly fields beyond the ones mentioned here, and they will be covered in subsequent chapters. The next chapter, meanwhile, will pay special attention to the actors of the process of character assassination: the attacker, the target, and the target audience.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The study of character assassination requires the use of the scientific method, which employs careful research procedures to provide reliable and verifiable evidence. This method is about critically testing, measuring, and checking the information.
- Research into character assassination is also rooted in specific investigative procedures involving quantitative and qualitative kinds. Qualitative methods may involve case studies. One of the common and effective methods of studying messages and communication is content analysis. And finally, experimental research methods allow researchers to provide insight into the dynamics of character assassination.
- From the view of rhetoric, character assassination is an act of communication. This is a strategic act, often designed to accomplish a goal. As such, character assassination can be a rhetorical strategy. Aristotle identified three modes of proof or ways to persuade an audience—ethos, logos, and pathos. *Ethos* refers to the speaker's credibility. *Logos* refers to the logical flow and construction of the message, and *pathos* refers to emotional appeals.
- The sociocultural perspective examines human behavior from the standpoint of society and the relationships among individuals within it. Character assassination is perceived as a process of interaction among various agents, including the attacker, the target, the media, and multiple active audiences. The process of social interaction is possible when it meets two basic requirements: interdependence and intersubjectivity of social actors. The sociocultural perspective also examines the individual's social identity.
- Political psychology is a research discipline that examines complex interactions between the world of politics on the one hand and people's experiences and behaviors, on the other. The target of attacks can be an individual who has already achieved a social status or an important social position of power or reputation. The person who is attacked is engaged in a political or other type of competition requiring other people's support or approval. A target of character assassination is usually successful in a certain professional field such as business, science, teaching, or an art. A person is vulnerable to character attacks if he or she represents an ideology, scientific theory, social or political cause, political party, or social movement.
- Political psychologists also explain what psychological mechanisms character attackers take into consideration when they launch their attacks. Several psychological models explain the reasons behind character attacks and the expected fallouts of such attacks. Among them are "sway the undecided," "create uncertainty," and "prevent defections."

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Why is important to use the scientific method to study character assassination when so much information is already easily available on the web?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative research into human behavior?

3. Aristotle identified three modes to persuade an audience—ethos, logos, and pathos. Using this assumption, could you suggest which character attacks are likely to be most effective? Could you use Aristotle’s ideas about persuasion to describe an effective defense against such an attack?
4. Why might it be a good idea not to use just one, but several perspectives—identified here—to study character assassination?
5. Could you suggest and discuss an example of scapegoating affecting someone’s reputation?
6. How can a character attack against a politician “prevent defections” from the ranks of his or her opponents?
7. Which of the perspectives explained in this chapter resonates most with what interests you about character assassination and why?

KEY TERMS

Case studies Detailed examinations of a particular event, person, or group.

Content analysis A research method that systematically organizes and summarizes both the manifest (what was actually said or written) and latent (the meaning of what was said and written) content of communication.

Experimental methods Procedures demonstrating that a certain outcome occurs when a particular variable is changed or manipulated by the researcher.

Intersubjectivity The ability of social actors to develop understanding and shared meaning via communication with other members of society.

Opinion surveys (polls) A series of questions designed to measure the opinions of a population.

Rhetoric The art of adapting persuasive symbols to specific situations or the field that studies how speakers engage in such adaptation.

Scapegoating A common practice in intergroup behavior based on excessive singling out a person or group for unjustified criticisms or blame.

Self-reports A qualitative method involving the use of solicited and unsolicited written opinions, letters, posted comments, emails, and private diaries.

Social identity Our own sense who we are as members of social groups that may include gender, ethnicity, occupation, or social class.

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The Actors in Character Attacks

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe the interaction among attackers, targets, and audience members in a character attack.
- Explain why the term “target” is more appropriate than “victim” when analyzing character attacks.
- Describe some of the goals that may motivate character assassins.
- Explain why the audience is important in a character attack.

Edward R. Murrow (1908–1965; see Image 4.1) was an American news reporter and anchor. Beginning his career as a war correspondent, Murrow was beamed to American households while covering World War II in London. After the war, he continued to report on political news. By the mid-1950s, Murrow had a respected news documentary program that aired on CBS called *See it Now* where he and his crew would engage in long-form investigative reporting, often with a personal touch (Bayley, 1981; Vitiello, 2003).

One thing that Murrow was worried about in the 1950s was the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908–1957; see Image 4.2). A Republican from Wisconsin, McCarthy built his political career on the insistence that the U.S. government was dominated by communists (Boissoneault, 2018). This was a persuasive message because the U.S. was engaged in a Cold War battle for influence with Soviet Russia, which had emerged as the other global superpower after World War II. McCarthy used intense methods to sniff out people he thought had communist sympathies, and his actions have been described as a witch hunt. Anyone about whom McCarthy was suspicious could be fired from their job or ordered to sign a pledge of loyalty to the United States government. Their backgrounds were investigated and things like attending a leftist rally or meeting while in college could be grounds for being dismissed from a job. While Murrow wanted the United States to prevail against Russia, he was concerned that McCarthy was out of control in his browbeating and vindictive tactics. He was worried



IMAGE 4.1 Journalist Edward R. Murrow in London in 1947

Source: CBS Radio

that McCarthy's investigations were eroding the freedoms that American citizens had guaranteed to them in the U.S. Constitution. Moreover, despite the fact that the Cold War was still raging, the U.S. Communist Party was weak at the time, so the threat of communist infiltration of the U.S. government was low (Keohane, 2018).

So, Murrow turned to his pulpit. He and his crew recorded an episode of *See it Now* that they called *A Report on Senator Joseph McCarthy*. The report painstakingly detailed the Senator's aggressive tactics and put together footage of McCarthy's own words and speeches to make its points about how he was out of control and harming American liberty. Murrow recorded narrative commentary between the audio and video clips, saying things like, "No one familiar with the history of this country can deny that congressional committees are useful. It is necessary to investigate before legislating, but



IMAGE 4.2 Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (center) in June 1954

Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ds-07186

the line between investigating and persecuting is a very fine one and the junior Senator from Wisconsin has stepped over it repeatedly.” Murrow (1954) reminded his audience that “this is no time for men who oppose Senator McCarthy’s methods to keep silent.” He then concluded with the line he always used at the end of *See it Now* and for which he is famous. “Good night,” he said, “and good luck” (par. 43).

The report aired on March 9, 1954. Some expressed concerns given news reporting was supposed to be unbiased and objective, while the *See it Now* report was decidedly one-sided. Yet, most hailed Murrow for being brave in taking on McCarthy (Bayley, 1981). The report aired to immediate acclaim, with outlets like the *New York Times* saying it was a milestone of “enlightened citizenship” (Gould, 1954, p. 38). In fact, CBS received “a deluge” of phone calls regarding the report, and it was overwhelmingly in favor of Murrow’s takedown of McCarthy. It was the largest outpouring of public reaction to a television program that CBS had ever seen (Laurent, 1954).

Yet, Murrow knew his report was one-sided, and he had invited McCarthy to respond to his allegations. So, one month later, McCarthy sent a tape to *See it Now* that the crew aired in its entirety. In McCarthy's response, he attacked Murrow and even called him a communist himself! He accused Murrow of supporting a Communist school in Moscow that indoctrinated children to communist beliefs. "I am compelled by the facts to say to you that Mr. Edward R. Murrow, as far back as twenty years ago, was engaged in propaganda for Communist causes," McCarthy (1954) explained, despite having no evidence to support his claim (par. 5). Murrow was "the cleverest and leader of the jackal pack," McCarthy sneered from behind his desk in the video. McCarthy's response was largely ineffective at swaying public opinion back to his side ("Murrow is Favored," 1954). In fact, shortly after it ran, his home state of Wisconsin began a recall campaign exclaiming "Joe must Go!" Likewise, just a few short months later, the U.S. Senate passed a vote of censure to condemn McCarthy for his actions. He died of hepatitis before seeking another term of office.

It would be overstating the case to say that Murrow's attack caused McCarthy to lose favor with the American public. But nonetheless, the Murrow-McCarthy exchange on *See it Now* is a prominent example of character assassination. While Murrow's report was likely justified given the negative impact that McCarthy was having on the political climate in the United States, it was still an obvious attempt to ruin the Senator's reputation. Likewise, McCarthy's response was even sharper and more acidic than the original *See it Now* program. The exchange also showcases the power of the audience in instances of character attack. Letters to newspaper editors and reviews of the two programs help give us a sense of public opinion in this case.

This complex interplay between Edward R. Murrow, Senator McCarthy, and the American people illustrates the need to investigate the various actors involved in a character attack. While it is obvious that there is both a target and an attacker, understanding character assassination is not that simple. One of the most important aspects of character attacks is the audience to whom they are addressed. After all, if character assassination is an intentional attempt to smear someone's character, we need to understand why someone would choose to do so, what they are hoping to gain, and how to determine if they are successful. While we will not take all of these up in this chapter, here we will lay the groundwork for understanding the various actors involved in attacks.

INTRODUCING THE KEY ACTORS

In Chapter 1, we introduced the five pillars of character assassination. We use this model as an effective framework for laying out the components of an attack and organizing an analysis of one, too! We will not revisit all of the pillars here, other than to note that we are zeroing in on a few pillars to understand the actors: the attacker, the target, and the audience.

When we use the term *attacker*, we are referring to the person who has instigated the character attack. Attackers are often specific people, such as when then candidate Donald Trump called his opponent Hillary Clinton a "nasty woman" during the

2016 presidential campaign. Attackers can also be groups of people. For example, when President Trump nominated Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court in September 2018, over two thousand law professors signed a letter saying they thought he was unfit for the job given that he had been accused of sexually assaulting a young woman while in high school (Svrluga, 2018). These lawyers also wrote that he had “unfathomable demeanor” and would not make an acceptable justice. In many cases, character attacks are anonymous, so that the public cannot determine exactly who the attacker is. Attacks that come via social media like Twitter are tied to a specific username, but it is not always possible to determine who is actually behind that account.

The *target* is the person who is the subject of the attack. In other words, the target is the person who is having their character assassinated. In the opening vignette from this chapter, both Murrow and McCarthy were targets of character attacks created by the other. Targets can be anybody from the popular girl in high school to the president of a country. Often, targets are high-profile people. This is because the attacker stands to gain a lot by making such people appear vulnerable in the eyes of the public.

The *audience* is the person or group of people who the attacker intends to influence. This may be a particular person, such as a teenager assassinating the character of their teacher in front of his mom to explain a bad grade. The audience may also be a group of people such as a specific voting bloc like a conservative religious group, university students, senior citizens, or undecided voters. The audience can also be a viewing and listening population of an entire country. In effect, attackers try to sway public opinion against public figures such as celebrities or political candidates to achieve some type of gain. Yet, different audiences have different characteristics that predispose them to being persuaded by varying kinds of claims, a notion that we will return to later in this chapter.

In short, character attacks are interactions among a variety of actors. Because character assassination is transacted by communication, we can say that our understanding of the interaction among these actors is heavily influenced by the **transaction model of communication**. This model emphasizes that communication occurs between two entities that are simultaneously encoding and decoding messages in a particular context. Communication is a continual process of meaning making:

In this model . . . we communicate to create relationships, form intercultural alliances, shape our self-concepts, and engage with others in dialogue to create communities. In short, we do not communicate about our realities; communication helps to construct our realities.

*(Communication in the real world: An introduction
to communication studies, 2016)*

As you can see, communication is much more than transmitting messages. It produces meanings and builds our complex views of ourselves, other people, and the world!

We will explore the contexts of character assassination in the next chapters, including social, cultural, relational, and political. All have an influence on character assassination communication.

THE ATTACKER

As we consider the attacker, the first question that you may ask is why someone chooses to launch a character attack. We have already defined character assassination as strategic and intentional attempts to smear a target's reputation. This means that the attacker is making a deliberate choice to engage in this action. Therefore, character assassination, as purposeful communication, does not happen by accident. People make choices to engage in behaviors, especially behaviors that may be seen by the public as unsavory, when they believe they will gain something from doing so. Of course, it is also possible to have a character be destroyed by a mistake or by negligence: a person can repost a report containing some character-damaging information without checking the facts.

Even recognizing that character assassination is an attacker's deliberate choice, it is important to note again that the identity of the attacker can be anonymous. As we have already mentioned, the advent of social media, where profiles are often linked to usernames instead of actual identities, means that it may be impossible to trace the source of an attack. Anonymous attacks can still have an impact on a target's reputation, as we will discuss in Chapter 7. Anonymous attacks can be deliberate and strategic in that they limit the possibility of an attack backfiring and harming the reputation of the attacker.

Before we consider the motivations of the attacker, let's reflect first on how the ability to attack has changed over time. Attackers have a variety of means at their disposal, which we study in more detail in Chapter 6. Historically, an attacker's ability to undermine their target's reputation was limited by their access to media resources that could gather an audience. After all, attacks will not work if no one pays attention to them! In Murrow's case, the attack on McCarthy was broadcast into the homes of millions of Americans via the television antenna. For most people these days who have grown up with the Internet and with information at their fingertips, it may be difficult to envision an era when families still patiently gathered around their small television sets each evening to watch the local and national news. Yet, there was once a time when television news was the dominant means of information acquisition and a trusted form of communication. TV burst on the scene in the 1950s. By 1960, 90 percent of U.S. households owned a TV (Ad Age, 2005). Given the importance of television news, news anchors like Murrow were dominant voices in the public sphere.

Yet not just anybody could get on television during those days. Even before Murrow's time, though, circulating attacks required taking a chance that a rumor would spread on its own through a community or access to a printing press to more broadly disseminate an attack. Recall the story of Martin Luther, introduced in Chapter 2. Luther could spread his ideas about the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church by using the printing press, which was then a relatively new invention. While using the printing press to spread ideas allowed these messages to disseminate throughout Luther's Germany, ordinary citizens would have had scant access to these tools.

Today, of course, anyone can launch an attack by opening the Twitter app on their phone. Spreading anonymous rumors in a community or using negative campaign ads are still methods attackers can use, but it is certainly the case that technology and social

media have “democratized” attackers’ abilities. In democratic countries, one does not need to have a government’s permission or to assemble a production team to film a negative campaign ad! Because attacking is easier, ordinary citizens these days are more likely to come under character attack. While in the past an attacker may have saved scarce resources to use in situations where they could really gain some advantage by smearing an opponent, today one no longer needs to be an elite to broadcast an attack to a wide audience. Many forms of cyberbullying are, unfortunately, examples of today’s character attacks.

What might an attacker hope to gain from launching attacks? There are, of course, many goals, some listed in Table 4.1. The most obvious is gaining advantage. In politics, “going negative” in presidential and other political campaigns is a strategy that many campaigns undertake to bring to light the skeletons in their opponents’ closets or their past mistakes. And in fact, research suggests that going negative in a political campaign can result in gains for the attacker (Fridkin & Kenney, 2019; Lariscy, 2012), so there may be good reasons for campaigns to do so!

There are numerous other goals that attackers may have: material advantages (such as in legal disputes), to knock an opponent off of their rhythm, or to rewrite a historical narrative. But regardless, the attacker is someone who weighs the pros and cons and decides to launch an attack for a particular reason.

On a simpler level, attackers often hope to catch the public eye or get attention. This is often the goal of the assassination attempts that occur in the entertainment industry. In 2009, when Kanye West interrupted Taylor Swift onstage at the MTV Video Music Awards to say that Beyoncé should have won the best video of the year, his relatively minor attack was likely motivated by a desire to get attention (Vincent, 2017). It became enough of an issue that West apologized on Twitter, a year later. Yet, West

TABLE 4.1 Possible attacker’s gains in a character attack

Gain	Arena	Example of Attack
Political advantage	Elections	Airing campaign ads that show negative things about your opponent
Get public attention	Politics, sports, and entertainment	Tweeting rumors about how a particular celebrity is engaged in extramarital affairs
Money or other material advantages	Law	Testifying in court that your ex-partner was a drunk so that you will get a higher divorce settlement
Throw someone off their game or undermine their confidence	Sports	Trash talking a rival on a pre-game interview to shake them up
Change a historical narrative	Politics	Writing an op-ed that accuses an old political opponent of lying or cheating

then accused Swift of manipulating the media to make him look bad and recanted his previous apology. The West-Swift feud has become known and has expanded beyond musical talent into character. On a more serious note, and returning to our opening vignette, it seems that Murrow deeply wanted the American public to take seriously his concerns with the actions of Senator McCarthy, and so he used his public forum and assassination methods to make an argument about the overbearing nature of the Senator's investigative tactics. Communication scholars Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples (2002) argue that in today's mediated and televisual age, groups seeking attention may have to mount "image events" or spectacles designed for public consumption to get publicity. A high-profile character attack could provide fodder for such an image event.

THE TARGET

While understanding the attacker's perspective may be relatively clear, there is more to say about the target of character attacks. We have already explained that targets are often high-profile individuals. That is where—in the public sphere—an attacker is likely to gain more of an advantage, because high-profile people have much more to lose if their reputation suffers. Because character attacks are commonplace in politics, targets are often politicians, both incumbents and upstarts.

Of course, some targets are more likely to be victims than others and some targets can survive character attacks pretty easily. Crisis consultant Eric Dezenhall (2014) refers to those folks who can be destroyed easily as having a "glass jaw." This term, from boxing, refers to people who look tough but cannot take a punch—as soon as they are hit, they shatter like glass. As Dezenhall reminds us, the appearance of being tough is not enough to escape controversy. In fact, social media have made it more likely for small users to be able to "take down" massive corporations. As he writes, "David has become Goliath, and Goliath has become David" (Dezenhall, 2014).

Others have called those that seem immune to character attacks made of "Teflon," a reference to the material frying pans are often made out of to which nothing is supposed to stick. **Teflon politicians** are politicians who seem to have an easy time avoiding blame or scandal even though they do not necessarily behave particularly well. They also often remain popular even when their policy choices do not succeed. U.S. President Ronald Reagan is largely regarded as a Teflon politician. His popularity was barely affected by the outcome of his policies (Tiffen, 2009). Political commentators often made this point about U.S. President Donald Trump. As one of many possible examples, Trump managed to get elected president in 2016 even after credible sources indicated his inappropriate behavior with women. Indeed, after a 2005 video of Trump saying that he liked to "grab [women] by the pussy" leaked in October of 2016, during the presidential campaign, Trump merely dismissed the video. The evidence, which could have ended the careers of many politicians, apparently did not destroy Trump's credibility among his supporters. While many people found the behavior disgusting and wholly discrediting of Trump's candidacy, much of the American populace did not seem to mind.

LET'S DISCUSS

It is worthwhile to pause here and explain why we suggest using the term “target” instead of “victim,” which may be tempting to use to describe all people whose characters are being assassinated. The easy answer is that we do not think that all targets of character attacks become victims. To say that someone is a victim is to indicate that they are seen as helpless, passive, and destroyed. Or it can mean that somebody is mistreated or wronged.

We emphasize that many targets use effective and strategic communication to shut down attacks. We want to call attention to the fact that some targets of character assassination emerge from attacks stronger than they were before. The fact that some attacks backfire and end up taking down the attacker and not the target indicates that “victim” is not an appropriate term for all instances of character assassination. Take the case of Murrow and McCarthy again. While Murrow’s attack on McCarthy was incredibly successful, at least based on the information we have from CBS, McCarthy’s response to Murrow, which tried to take down the reporter, failed. There are a host of reasons why that was. For one, it is likely that McCarthy waited too long to respond. The public attention was on the original *See it Now* report in March 1954, and public attention is limited. By the time McCarthy replied almost a month later, most people were probably not paying too terribly close of attention to this public feud. Second, McCarthy misread the appropriate response to Murrow’s report. After all, if the report accused him of being an aggressive and vindictive investigator of even the smallest communist ties, for McCarthy to call Murrow a communist based on incredibly limited evidence did not refute the original report, but just confirmed its main points (Keohane, 2020).

Thus, despite McCarthy’s attempt, Murrow was not a victim in this scenario. He came out looking just as trustworthy and reasonable as before. His public reputation was not tarnished at all. Of course, this is not to suggest that there are not targets who are also victims! As the opening example from Chapter 1 makes clear, 1988 presidential candidate Gary Hart’s reputation was truly and utterly destroyed by the reporting from the *Herald* and has largely not been rehabilitated.

Could you suggest other cases, real or hypothetical, in which a target of character attacks is not qualified—in your view—to be called a victim? What do you think of an individual who commits an immoral act and then hides this fact from the public? Would a vigorous campaign in social media—to tell the truth and reveal this immoral act—make this individual a “victim”?

Similarly, despite allegations that Trump had been defrauding students at the now-defunct Trump University, he managed to talk his way out of any serious ramifications among the American public. In a somewhat similar manner, journalist Matt Bai (2014) wrote that former president Bill Clinton had luck in weathering an impeachment scandal and still being seen as “roguish and irrepressible,” “a man too dynamic and insatiable for his own good but not necessarily for ours” (p. 205). In short, while Clinton was impeached, he survived his second term in office and is largely viewed, according to public opinion polls, as a strong president who shepherded the nation into the new, prosperous, digital age.

Consider the example of former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi (b. 1936) who was also called a Teflon politician. The *New York Times* wrote about him: “Widely ridiculed, endlessly written about, long unscathed by his evident misogyny and diverse legal travails, Berlusconi proved a Teflon politician. Nothing stuck. He had the gift of the gab. He had a tone. He connected.” (Cohen, 2016). While Berlusconi did ultimately fall from grace in 2011 and resigned, he enjoyed a number of years as a political untouchable.

Several factors influence the **survival rates for character attacks**—the general expectation that a character attack of a particular type under particular circumstances does not hurt the reputation of an individual. The chances to survive character attacks depends on several factors. They usually include resources available to the target for defense, the motivation of adversaries, a preexisting strong support base, and popularity with the media and the general public. It should come as no surprise that targets with more resources who can afford to hire crisis consultants and strategy teams are often better equipped to handle character attacks than others. Perhaps this is another reason why Bill Clinton survived politically during his infamous scandal. As other chapters indicate, too, publics have double standards and hold men and women, white and black politicians, and entertainers to separate standards. Yet, it is also important to keep in mind that the public may have higher expectations for the behavior of public figures like politicians and entertainers. So, while it is true that they may have access to more resources for defense, they may also be held to higher standards of behavior in the first place. For instance, most lawyers and businesspeople can commit infidelity in marriage without it spreading beyond the immediate circle of people affected. The same is not true for politicians who, like Gary Hart, may find their indiscretions front page news. Having a prominent reputation is associated with a greater probability of public outrage during a reputational crisis due to unmet hopes and expectations.

Professional crisis consultants or political campaign managers often question and test their clients to find out what their potential vulnerabilities are. **Character vulnerability** is the state of being unprotected from the possibility of having one’s character attacked. Such qualities can refer to the individual’s identity, personality, and character, as well as to their actions or inactions in the past. In general terms, everyone has character vulnerabilities, however some people have more due to their activities, or specific social and political contexts. Some character vulnerabilities can be made up by opponents or ill-wishers and be linked to various stereotypes.

Politicians in the United States who think about running for prominent office also form “exploratory committees.” The purpose of these committees is to vet the candidate and to see if there are any character vulnerabilities or other “red flags” that could prevent a successful run for office. Determining what those red flags are can be challenging, but consultants may make lists of character traits, background information, and past affiliations to determine weaknesses. For example, having extramarital affairs may limit a candidate’s potential as it may make them seem untrustworthy. Likewise, having attended meetings of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a prominent leftist student group in the 1960s, may make a candidate today seem like a radical socialist. That former U.S. President Barack Obama had attended the church of the divisive and controversial Reverend Jeremiah Wright, became a controversy during his 2008 presidential campaign. Wright had delivered sermons saying that black Americans should not sing “God Bless America,” but instead “God Damn America” (Ross & El-Buri, 2008). Wright also suggested that U.S. terrorism had brought on the 9/11 attacks (Powell, 2008). Obama responded to the criticism about his association with Wright in his famous *A More Perfect Union* speech in 2008 and again in his memoirs (Obama, 2020). This illustrates how associations with individuals seen to be outside the mainstream can be fodder for character attacks.

During an election campaign, it is important to identify early the candidate’s weaknesses that can be exploited by their opponents. Campaign managers often conduct media research and run focus groups to obtain any information, truthful or fabricated, about their candidate. Even though a lot of information is often untrue, it is an imperative to constantly monitor the new information and be ready to address it. One of the other ways to test a potential target for vulnerabilities is to think in stereotypes. While we tend to consider stereotypes as simplistic generalizations (and indeed, they often are), stereotypes also tend to be convenient shortcuts that people easily retrieve from memory to make judgements (Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, 2018). Although stereotypes can be positive or negative, character attackers focus on negative stereotypes and use them against their targets. Thus, in 2020, Maria Sandu, a presidential candidate in Moldova, was commonly attacked by the opposition for being a single woman and thus incapable of running a country (Vinogradova, 2020). Sandu’s electoral team was ready to face such attacks appealing to a conservative electorate unwilling to see a woman as president. Chapter 8 deals with defenses against character attacks.

One other factor that can help determine that likelihood of a target succumbing to a character assassination attempt is to consider the type of society in which the attack circulates. In societies where the public sphere is marginal and power in society is distributed unequally, powerful political elites often resort to domination and coercion to enforce compliance. The same applies to the use of character assassination by powerful actors. In an open, democratic society, the possibilities to launch or respond to attacks are more evenly distributed among various actors due to an active public sphere with dynamic interactivity, political participation, and a pluralism of voices. In authoritarian systems, the media are expected to reproduce the opinions of dominant players and promote the interests of the powerful. This means that state-controlled media may launch character assassination against dissidents or others who attempt to critique policies or people associated with the elite. Those targeted may not have avenues to respond. We

will discuss the relationship between autocratic and totalitarian societies and character assassination in more depth in Chapter 11, but for the time being, it is important to note that this is an important dynamic that influences the interaction and opportunities for both the attacker and the target.

THE AUDIENCE

Perhaps the most important component of the character assassination communication interaction is the audience. After all, the audience is the ultimate arbiter of whether an attack is successful or not. Character attacks, especially in the political realm, tend to be addressed to specific groups or even to a general sense of “the public.”

In democratic societies, the metaphor of the public sphere underlies political communication and its significance. A concept originally created by theorist Jurgen Habermas (1989) in his famous work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the public sphere in its modern instantiation refers to a space where private citizens come together to deliberate over the affairs of the state. While many scholars have critiqued and refined the concept of the public sphere, the idea that ordinary citizens in a democratic government come together to talk and debate about the direction of the nation remains foundational.

In Habermas’s original formulation, the citizens’ deliberations ought to be only about matters that were public, not private. Public issues included things like leadership and policies and laws. The feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (1990) reminds us that it is not easy to draw a clear distinction between what is public and what is private. She uses the concept of domestic violence to illustrate the idea that historically, marginalized groups have had to fight for key concepts to be taken seriously as public issues. In the past, domestic violence was seen as a private issue between a couple, instead of as a public conversation about the structural inequalities between men and women. The example of politicians being unfaithful to their partners also raises the question of the distinction between public and private. As the debate in the media after the Gary Hart case makes clear, the question was less “did Gary Hart commit adultery?” and more “what does this situation say about his judgment?” Hart, in Bai’s telling anyway, remains staunchly convinced that it was none of anyone’s business what he was doing behind closed doors.

Analysts of character assassination have to think about the complex interplay between the public and the private. This also points to the importance of the audience in making determinations about these issues. As one common example shows, the United States has remained somewhat uncomfortable with divorced political candidates, while countries in Europe like Italy and France have embraced divorced candidates without question. The characteristics of the public are important for understanding character assassination.

Scholarship on the public sphere also provides to analysts of character assassination the recognition that in pluralistic, diverse societies, there are multiple publics with permeable boundaries. Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer (2001) call these **counter-publics**, which are public spheres that have specific, unique identities different from the

“average” audience or community. The general idea here is that there are multiple public spheres, not all of which have the same amount of power and influence. Instead of appealing to a universal conception of a citizen, counterpublics tend to affirm specific gender, racial, religious, or other identities. While there is a vast amount of scholarship on how these operate and how they are connected, there are a few relevant things for our study of character assassination. First is the idea that there are multiple audiences and that some messages resonate with some audiences and not with others. Likewise, attackers may only be trying to reach some audiences in regard to shifting opinion about the target. A politician shoring up their base by attacking their opponent often gets more support from people in their own party while simultaneously losing support with the other party. They can very well decide that this tradeoff is worth it.

Second, let’s recognize that creating a common enemy via character attack can fashion a community around which some people can rally. Consider the January 2017 Women’s March on Washington where women flocked to the United States Capitol wearing pink “pussy hats,” as seen in Image 4.3. These hats were a form of character attack on Donald Trump, sending the message that these women would not ignore his comments about grabbing women by their lady parts or forget about the accusations of sexual assault. While they did little to disrupt the support that Trump enjoyed among his base, the folks participating in the rally viewed them as an invitation to join a community and resist. Third, not all audiences have an equal power or are likely to be appealed to in character attacks. Lack of interest, complacency, or distraction among many other factors can explain why some audiences remain passive and insusceptible to critical information.

To summarize, what is persuasive to a specific audience? Entire university courses can be and are taught about the dynamics of persuasion! There are a few principles



IMAGE 4.3 Marchers pack Pennsylvania Avenue wearing pink pussy hats at the Women’s March in Washington, D.C., on January 21, 2017

Source: Photograph by Mobilus in Mobili, CC BY-SA 2.0

that we can identify for our purposes, though. The first is that to reach a particular audience one should appeal to their values. While many cultures or countries have relatively abstract and universal values—in the United States we value individualism and autonomy, for example—subcultures often have their own specific values. So, an attack trying to reach an audience of evangelical Christians might design a message showing their opponent to have acted in violation of the values evangelical Christians typically hold. Such a message might smear the opponent as a bad Christian because they had extramarital affairs or engaged in same-sex relationships. This type of an appeal would make an audience member feel cognitive dissonance—like they could not be consistent with their values while supporting a political candidate who had violated them.

The second persuasive principle an attacker may use is to demonstrate that they are a member of the group they are appealing to. We are far more likely to be persuaded by people who we think are similar to us. If a member of the Republican Party is trying to argue against a fellow Republican running for a political office, they can explain in their message that they have been a member of this party for many years and that nonetheless, they feel compelled to speak out against the candidate.

Finally, appealing to the audience's self-interest is always a good idea! If an attacker can demonstrate that the character flaws of their opponent might negatively impact the specific members of the audience, that is likely to be persuasive. For example, if the dishonest character of a politician means that they are doing things to fill their campaign coffers instead of helping their constituents via funding parks or libraries, it is easy to see how this audience would react negatively.

There are plenty of other principles of persuasion that can guide how and when audiences are likely to be persuaded by attacks, and we will look at the effectiveness of attacks in more detail in Chapter 7. But any discussion of the audience for character attacks would be incomplete without recognizing that different audiences are likely to be persuaded by different things. A strategic attacker is primarily concerned with understanding what audiences want and need in order to find an appropriate persuasion strategy. This involves additional efforts, such as actively participating in ongoing public discussions.

The ultimate point here is simple: because character assassination is strategic and intentional, in order for it to succeed, it has to be persuasive to a particular audience. Some audiences may find an attack persuasive while others may not. So, we as scholars of character assassination need to think about the audience as a complex group of people with different values and beliefs. As a result, it can be tough to determine the overall impact of a character attack, although we will take this up in more detail in a later chapter.

This chapter has zoomed in on three pillars of character assassination that are all related to the actors involved in an attack. These three pillars are: the target, the attacker, and the audience. We have discussed the interactions among these three, and we have identified the importance of the audience in determining whether an attack is successful. We have also noted what makes some targets vulnerable to attacks and why attackers choose to launch attacks in the first place. This can help us to better understand the dynamics of an attack and can lay the groundwork for a thorough analysis therein. The next step in this analysis will be content and types of character attacks.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The term *attacker* refers to the person who has instigated the character attack. The *target* is the person who is the subject of the attack. The *audience* is the person or group of people who the attacker is intending to sway with their attack.
- Because character assassination is transacted by communication, our understanding of the interaction among these actors is heavily influenced by the transaction model of communication. This model emphasizes that communication occurs between two entities that are simultaneously encoding and decoding messages in a particular context.
- Character attackers have several goals. The most obvious is gaining political, material, or other advantages. Attackers often hope to catch the public eye or get attention. Attackers can throw someone off their game or undermine their confidence. Character attacks can also change a historical narrative.
- It is appropriate to use the term “target” instead of “victim” to describe people whose characters are being assassinated. Some targets are more likely to be victims than others and some targets can survive character attacks relatively easily.
- Several factors influence the survival rates for character attacks. They usually include resources available to the target for defense, the motivation of adversaries, a pre-existing strong support base, and popularity with the media and the general public.
- The audience is the ultimate arbiter of whether an attack is successful or not. Character attacks, especially in the political realm, tend to be addressed to specific groups or to a general sense of “the public.”
- Different audiences think different things are persuasive. To reach a particular audience one could appeal to their values, demonstrate that they are a member of that group, or appeal to the audience’s self-interest.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Do you think Edward R. Murrow was justified in attacking Senator Joseph McCarthy’s character? Why or why not?
2. How important is the motivation of the attacker for understanding character assassination? Are there some motivations (or reasons based on circumstances or other factors) that attackers have that you think are easier to justify?
3. How do you see the influence of the public sphere theory discussed in the chapter on politics today? Choose any case or topic relevant to today.
4. Identify the difference between a target and a victim as explained in this chapter. Can you think of examples of targets that did become victims in current events? What about targets that did not? What are the similarities and differences among these cases? Would you call McCarthy a victim of character attacks?
5. What are some things that targets of character assassination can do to make sure they do not become victims of character attacks?

6. Without going deep into details, think about the facts related to your biography that can potentially be used in attacks against you. This can be a traffic ticket, for example, or a bill not paid on time, or a mistake. How could these mistakes be exaggerated by some to convert them into character attacks? How would you defend yourself?

KEY TERMS

Character vulnerability The quality or state of being unprotected to the possibility of being character attacked. Such qualities can refer to the individual's identity, personality, and character, as well as to their actions or inactions in the past.

Counterpublics Public spheres that have specific, unique identities different from the "average" audience or community.

Survival rates for character attacks The general expectation that a character attack of a particular type under particular circumstances does not hurt the reputation of an individual.

Teflon politicians Political figures who seem to have an easy time avoiding blame or scandal even though they do not necessarily behave particularly well.

Transaction models of communication Models emphasizing that communication occurs between two entities that are simultaneously encoding and decoding messages in a particular context.

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Content and Types of Character Attacks

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify different types of allegations and how they can be used to attack a target's character.
- Categorize character attacks.
- Distinguish between horizontal and vertical attacks and explain why this dimension of character assassination matters.
- Explain what makes a character attack relatively simple or complex.

The European Parliament is the place where representatives of all European Union member states meet to discuss legislation, international treaties, and the E.U. budget. In general, it does not have a reputation for exciting debate and rhetorical fireworks: most European news media focus their attention mainly on national politics, with the dealings in the E.U. Parliament making headlines less frequently. However, an element of theatrics was brought in by Nigel Farage (b. 1964; see Image 5.1), leader of the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP) from 2010 to 2016. As the name indicates, UKIP strove for the country's withdrawal from the European Union—or, as it has become widely known, “Brexit.” In this, the party was highly successful: thanks in no small part to UKIP's relentless campaigning efforts, the British voted to leave the E.U. in a 2016 referendum and have since indeed left.

Farage was commonly characterized as a populist (Tournier-Sol, 2015; Block & Negrine, 2017). During his years in the European parliament, he frequently railed against the elites running the E.U. project, attacking them as a bunch of unelected bureaucrats who were only out to serve their own interests. He became recognizable for his inflammatory, sarcastic speeches, which often included personal attacks on national European leaders or prominent E.U. officials. One of his targets was Herman Van Rompuy, the former prime minister of Belgium, who became President of the European Council from 2009 to 2014. Farage openly mocked the fact that such a prestigious post was awarded to an unknown person—one of Europe's “political



IMAGE 5.1 UKIP leader Nigel Farage delighted in personal attacks on his fellow MPs in European Parliament

Source: Photo by DAVID ILIFF. License: CC BY-SA 3.0

pygmies,” as he put it (UKIP MEPs, 2009). “Who are you?” he thundered at the visibly uncomfortable Van Rompuy in a meeting of parliament in early 2010. “I’ve never heard of you . . . nobody in Europe had ever heard of you!” Although he thought the new Council President had “the charisma of a damp rag and the appearance of a low-grade bank clerk,” Farage nevertheless called Van Rompuy a dangerous man. “I have

no doubt that it is your intention to be the quiet assassin of European democracy and the European nation state,” he remarked ominously. And small wonder, he added, because: “You come from Belgium, which is of course pretty much a non-country” (UKIP MEPs, 2010; Gies, 2011).

In his numerous character attacks on other European MPs, Nigel Farage used a wide variety of accusations, targeting anything from their alleged alcoholism and relative obscurity to their supposed lack of democratic legitimacy. In this chapter, we will discuss such and similar statements as allegations, which is a common type of character attacks. We will then examine other methods to commit character assassination, including ridiculing, disgracing, and erasing. In addition, we will consider several factors to distinguish between different types of character attacks. They include hierarchy, timing, and complexity.

ALLEGATIONS

Let’s get back to Farage and his inflammatory speeches in European parliament. Most of these attacks fall within one particular type called **allegations**: accusatory statements, either true or false, about an individual’s flaws or shortcomings. The UKIP leader’s numerous jibes at Van Rompuy and other European politicians all consist of statements accusing these prominent E.U. officials of personal deficiencies. However, not all allegations are the same. Broadly speaking, there are three aspects of an individual that can become the focus of character attacks: their *personality*, their *behavior*, and their *social identity* (see Table 5.1).

In Chapter 1, we defined personality as the totality of a person’s stable features, such as their cognitive functions, behavioral traits, and emotional makeup. When Farage claims that Van Rompuy has “the charisma of a damp rag,” he is revealing a (perceived) defect in the man’s personality that makes him unfit for the high position he holds. Strictly speaking, the remark that Van Rompuy looks like “a low-grade bank clerk” does not attack his personality, as it is about appearance, but of course there is a strong implication that this unimpressive exterior reflects a character that is equally drab and uninspiring. Likewise, when people are accused of arrogance, pettiness,

TABLE 5.1 Types of allegations

Type of Allegation	Definition	Example
Personality	Stable set of individual features including emotional make up and behaviors	Accusing someone of being bad-tempered or unintelligent
Behavior	What an individual does or has done	Accusing someone of drinking alcohol while at work
Social identity	The groups or statuses with which an individual is associated	Accusing someone of being gay and implying that this affiliation is immoral

narcissism, stupidity, or aggressiveness, their personality is under attack, as all of these are supposed to be stable personal traits. Whether an individual's personality traits do indeed remain stable during their lifespan is a debatable question. What matters is that many people choose to assume so.

Behavior can also be the focus of character attacks: things that a person has done in the past, is currently doing, or is expected to do in the future. As a case in point, Farage frequently alluded to rumors that Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission from 2014 to 2019, was an alcoholic. He remarked that "Mr. Juncker has had a rough ride in the British press . . . we're told that he drinks cognac for breakfast" (Dr Watson, 2018a). More subtle was his comment that the newly appointed president and the other members of the European Commission did not represent a fresh start but were "frankly . . . as stale and musty as a corked bottle of wine" (UKIP MEPs, 2014). As you can see, attacks on a person's behavior are also indirect attacks on their personality, as the bad behavior is supposed to reveal something about who they truly are. Juncker's cognac-drinking indicated alcoholism and hence a weak, morally flawed character. Moreover, Farage portrayed him as part of an unaccountable European elite, characterizing Juncker as "the ultimate Brussels insider, somebody who's always operated with dark backroom deals and stitch-ups" (Dr Watson, 2018b).

Finally, there is someone's **social identity**. This term refers to a person's perceived social position and group affiliation. The word "perceived" here means that our social position and group affiliation can change based on the viewer's position. People identify themselves and are identified by others, for example, as a man, woman, or intersex; a member of a particular nation; a person belonging to an ethnic group or religion; or a member of the middle class and a supporter of a particular party. Put briefly, this is not necessarily about what the individual *does*, but about who they are perceived to be. Inevitably, these social affiliations and identities are bound to culturally determined norms and expectations (we will discuss culture in Chapter 9). Some affiliations may count as a definite strike against an individual, or disqualify their good character altogether, such as being gay or atheist in conservative circles, or being a creationist (rejecting the theory of evolution) in progressive circles. Others may be used to sow dissent and feed suspicions. A good example is the way Farage ties Van Rompuy's Belgian nationality to his allegation that this man intends to be "the quiet assassin of the European nation state." After all, what else could one expect from a citizen of the "non-country" Belgium? More generally, the UKIP leader consistently framed Van Rompuy, Juncker, and others as members of a self-serving European elite that did not hold itself accountable to anyone. This social affiliation disqualified them by default, casting their motives in a sinister light from the get-go.

Many character attacks take place in the form of allegations, but those are not the only ways character can be assassinated. There are at least six other ways to damage or destroy a person's reputation: name-calling, ridiculing, fearmongering, exposing, disgracing, and erasing. We will discuss each of them in turn. Please keep in mind that these are not mutually exclusive categories. At times, ridicule and disgracing can go hand in hand, for instance, or certain allegations can contribute to fearmongering. Some character attacks may not comfortably fit in any single category. The purpose of this categorization is *not* to present a rigid, absolute scheme, but rather to provide a

helpful tool for thinking and talking about the various ways in which character assassins go about their business.

NAME-CALLING

We speak of **name-calling** when an attacker applies a negatively charged term to a target. Such terms can refer to the target's personality or behavior, e.g. "liar," "traitor," "bitch," "pervert," and so on. (The distinction between personality and behavior is not always easy to make in these cases.) Words such as "idiot," "buffoon," or "mentally ill" were used to attack sitting U.S. presidents or presidential candidates (Shiraev & Keohane, 2020). Negative terms can also refer to the target's status or affiliation. The latter category includes digs at someone's ideological convictions—e.g. "communist," "fascist," "atheist," "tree hugger"—but also ethnic or gender-based slurs like "kraut," "chink," or "fag." As a method of character attack, name-calling is not all that different from making allegations, except that the accusation is reduced to a single word that can be shouted at a target, or put on a billboard, placard, or bumper sticker, without any further explanation, arguments, or supporting evidence. Such short insults create problems for the targets because they often do not know how to respond to jibes that appear particularly outrageous.

Name-calling often takes the form of *labeling*, which means that a negatively charged term is consistently applied to a target, so that the audience comes to strongly associate this "label" with a particular person (Barrinha, 2011; Moncrieffe & Eyben, 2007). Often, these labels are formulated as nicknames. As we saw in Chapter 3, Donald Trump labeled his Democrat opponents "Crooked Hillary" in the 2016 U.S. election campaign and "Sleepy Joe" in 2020. These slurs became very successful hashtags on Twitter. Other infamous derogatory nicknames include "Bloody Mary" for Queen Mary I of England and Ireland, "Tricky Dick" for U.S. President Nixon, and "Wacko Jacko" for popstar Michael Jackson. Once such labels start circulating—from person to person or in the media—they "stick" and are very hard to get rid of.

RIDICULE

Another widespread and often very effective method of character assassination is **ridicule**, which is purposeful and contemptuous exaggeration or distortion in a comical context. In the early 1800s, large parts of Europe were controlled by the French conqueror and self-crowned emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821; see Image 5.2). Despite his efforts and threats, he never managed to invade Britain. The British responded by unleashing a torrent of anti-Napoleonic propaganda which not only reached domestic audiences, but many people on the Continent as well. Among this British offensive were numerous cartoons depicting Napoleon as a tiny figure with a ridiculously large hat. The image did much to undermine the French conqueror's claims to political and military greatness. In the words of historian Simon Burrows, "The creation of 'Little Boney' was a propaganda master stroke, allowing cartoonists to portray



IMAGE 5.2 A diminutive Napoleon slices off a piece of world in this 1805 cartoon by James Gillray

Source: Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain

him as a petulant child, a toy soldier, an absurd Lilliputian, a dwarf attempting to play the role of a giant” (Burrows, 2005, p. 129).

Cartoons mocking politicians and other public figures exist to this day, but they are only one form of ridicule. Any visual or verbal attack that induces the audience to laugh at the expense of a person belongs in this category. Sometimes ridicule does little more than portray the target in a laughable manner and hence diminish their prestige—think of caricatures of political leaders and celebrities, for instance, or of pictures and videos of public figures that were taken at an inopportune moment and make them look like complete idiots. When U.S. President George W. Bush in 2005 tried to leave the room after a press conference and picked the wrong door, rattling the doorknob in vain and turning back to the cameras with a helpless grin, the video fragment went around the world to great hilarity. Should we see this as a character attack, though? Undoubtedly, many people shared the video online for no other reason than that they found it amusing. However, for those opposed to Bush and his policies, it also provided an opportunity to mock the president and take him down to size.

Journalists and media commentators frequently used ridicule to attack foreign countries’ representatives, especially if the relationships between two countries are adversarial. Russian pro-government media, for example, for years were picking on Jen Psaki, a spokesperson for the U.S. State Department and then, since 2021, for the White House. She was meanly attacked as “uneducated” or an “incompetent fool”

for her omissions and errors during press conferences (Eurasia Daily, 2020). Thus, by ridiculing a person representing the United States, the attackers cast doubts on Washington's entire foreign policy (the subject that we examine in Chapter 12).

Ridicule can also have more sophisticated messages to convey. This is especially true in the case of satire, where caricatures of public figures serve to make a point about their alleged hypocrisy, lying, greed, lack of awareness, or other undesirable behaviors. This happens a lot in satirical TV shows like *South Park*, which frequently includes real-life figures and mocks them mercilessly for their perceived flaws and wrongdoings. Likewise, in the United States and other countries, late-night talk show hosts have increasingly mixed journalism and entertainment, ridiculing the doings and sayings of politicians without adherence to strict journalistic standards (Lichter & Farnsworth, 2020). However, the line between “harmless fun” and biting mockery is often hard to draw, if indeed it can be drawn at all.

LET'S DISCUSS

Personal looks, manners, and habits—all matter in such character attacks. U.S. President Andrew Jackson was derided in the press for acting like royalty and was depicted in political cartoons as King Andrew I of Britain. President Coolidge was infamously mocked for taking afternoon naps. Al Smith, Governor of New York and Democratic presidential candidate in 1928, was ridiculed as a person with an Irish background, his attackers remarking that the White House would smell like “corned beef, cabbage, and home brew.” President Ford was frequently mocked for his clumsiness after several accidental falls during his domestic and foreign public appearances. Opponents eagerly turned to the remark of former president Johnson, who had allegedly mocked Ford by saying that “Jerry Ford is so dumb he cannot fart and chew gum at the same time.” (Although the verb “fart” in most commentaries was naturally replaced with “think” as a form of self-censorship.) In the same vein, Johnson had also quipped, “Jerry Ford is a nice guy, but he played too much football with his helmet off.” George H. W. Bush in 1992 was relentlessly ridiculed as an ignorant politician who was out of touch with ordinary Americans after he had been visibly amazed by an electronic scanner in a supermarket. President Clinton in May of 1993 was mocked by almost every mainstream media outlet, and particularly by his opponents, for his \$200 haircut, which he had received aboard Air Force One (the presidential aircraft) before taking off. At that time, coincidentally, Clinton himself was arguing against the government's wasteful spending. When Senator Barack Obama entered the presidential race, he was frequently mocked for not appearing “presidential” enough. Ridiculing became relentless. A photo of Obama (accompanied by sarcastic remarks) wearing traditional Kenyan clothing

went viral (Smart & Shiraev, 2014). As you should remember and will see further via numerous examples, ridiculing and mocking former president Trump was relentless in the U.S. and world media and social networks.

Yet what if ridiculing presidents and other top leaders is part of the “natural” political process, in which (1) no one is immune from criticisms and (2) politicians must appear authentic or “real” as a person? Do you think that ridiculing is supposed to be expected and even invited by political leaders’ supporters? Would you consider deliberate self-ridiculing as a form of effective preventive measures against character attacks?

FEARMONGERING

Ridicule turns a person into a laughingstock. **Fearmongering**—or deliberately arousing public fear or alarm about a particular individual or an issue—turns them into a threat, someone to be hated and feared. This occurs when attackers manage to create feelings of anxiety in their audience toward a target. In Chapter 2, we saw how Cicero set his fellow senators up against Catiline, presenting him as a *hostis*, an enemy of the state, who wanted to set fire to Rome and murder all good men in their beds. In modern election campaigns, fearmongering often occurs when a candidate warns people about the disastrous consequences if his opponent should be voted into office. In doing so, he triggers prejudices that his audience may hold about the gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ideology, or other defining characteristics of the rival candidate.

Fearmongering is often used against ethnic or cultural groups. Through a process called “othering,” the members of these groups can be framed as outsiders who are not like “us” in their beliefs, behavior, or even their appearance (Said, 2003). From there, it is only a small step to suggest that “they” are out to get “us”: Muslims want to overthrow Western (Christian) civilization, gay people want to destroy marriage, etc. In extreme cases, othering can even result in *dehumanization*, or the portrayal of individuals or groups as beastlike, monstrous, demonic, or otherwise subhuman. This often happens in times of war and extreme social tension. The most notorious example is probably the association of the Jewish people with vermin in Nazi propaganda—in particular in the 1940 movie *Der ewige Jude* (“The Eternal Jew”), which draws close parallels between Jewish people and rats (Hazkani, 2008). It goes without saying that the dehumanization of entire peoples and countries has caused immeasurable harm and has ruined many lives throughout the centuries.

EXPOSING

A target is exposed when compromising material about their private views or actions is deliberately made public. Exposing thus goes a step further than making allegations, in the sense that “evidence” is presented. Whether that evidence is genuine or not

is another matter! During the American Revolution, George Washington was falsely exposed as an insincere rebel when letters were discovered in which he professed his sympathy for the King of England and expressed doubts about American independence. Of course, it later turned out that these letters were forgeries, created to besmirch his name and damage his credibility as the leader of the revolution (Ford, 1889). However, genuine evidence can also be used to commit character assassination, for instance when an electoral team publishes the private correspondence of a political rival to expose him or her as ignorant, clueless, or a hypocrite. Threats of exposing some information that could be seen as damaging to someone's character has long been used as a form of political manipulation or criminal extortion. While exposure may or may not be considered character assassination in the colloquial sense of the word, it meets the criteria we formulated in Chapter 1.

DISGRACING

During the American Revolution, revolutionaries burned the effigy of the British King George III to show that they held him in contempt (Shaw, 1981, pp. 14–15). In the U.K., effigies of Guy Fawkes are burned in annual celebrations because he attempted (but failed) to blow up the King and the House of Lords in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

Disgracing is the pursuit of a person's loss of respect, honor, or esteem. It is the opposite of honoring. When someone is honored, they are publicly celebrated for their virtues and achievements, for instance through the reception of an award or the erection of a monument in their honor. When someone is disgraced, their good name is publicly renounced. There are various ways to achieve this outcome. One is to take away a person's distinguishing markers of honor. It is easy to find numerous examples of effigies of modern politicians being burned these days in various parts of the world. Awards and honorary titles have been revoked, symbols of status and authority stripped off, statues spray-painted or pulled down, as was happening in the summer of 2020 in the United States and in some European countries. A very effective way to disgrace someone is to violate their image in a public ceremony.

Disgraced people are often expelled from the communities or organizations to which they belong. The Catholic Church, for instance, has in the past often excommunicated people whom it regarded as sinners or heretics. Such expulsions turn people into *personae non gratae*, i.e. “undesirables” whose views or behavior are considered so beyond the pale that they are no longer accepted as part of a group. In the 20th century, in communist countries such as China or the Soviet Union, a harsh form of disgrace was expulsion from the Communist Party, which could mean the end of a person's professional career and loss of government benefits. These days, a disgraced individual can face profound social isolation and even loss of employment. Many professional contracts, for example, contain moral clauses which limit or restrain certain behaviors of athletes and singers.

In many cases, disgracing happens through the practice of *shaming*, which is public humiliation of the target to punish them for their perceived misdeeds. In medieval and early modern Europe, people who were convicted of crimes were often condemned to

the pillory, a wooden framework with holes through which they had to stick their head and hands. Thus secured, they were displayed in public, where the jeering mob could pelt them with rotten fruit or dung (Spierenburg, 1984, pp. 85–86). Nowadays these “pillories” have often gone increasingly digital: think, for instance, of websites which specialize in “slut shaming” by publishing the pictures and names of individuals who have had questionable relationships or extramarital affairs (Chapter 13 discusses this in more detail).

ERASING

Erasing from collective memory or simply **erasing** involves a systematic deleting of information about an individual from printed and other sources. In George Orwell’s famous novel *1984*, originally published in 1949, which sketches a dystopian vision of a totalitarian state, newspapers and history books are constantly being rewritten. Individuals whose deeds and sayings damage the interests of the ruling party vanish without a trace—not just from real life, but even from records of the past. Orwell got his literary vision from Stalinist Russia, where we indeed have examples of prominent persons who were removed from pictures after they had fallen out of Stalin’s favor (King, 1997). Even after Stalin died in 1953, the “memory erasing” practice continued. Several names of prominent leaders, such as former Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev, were completely erased from government documents in the 1960s and their names were ordered not to be mentioned in the government-controlled media.

TABLE 5.2 Character attacks: descriptions of the types

Type of Character Attacks	Description
Allegations	Accusatory statements, either true or false, about an individual’s flaws or shortcomings.
Name-calling	Generating quick, short insults and verbal or written generalizations, generally without factual proof.
Ridiculing	Purposeful and contemptuous exaggeration or distortion in a comical context.
Fearmongering	Intentionally spreading frightening information about a person to purposely arouse fear or manipulate the public.
Exposing	Deliberately making a person’s private actions or opinions public.
Disgracing	Consciously pursuing the loss of respect, honor, or esteem of another person.
Erasing	Systematic deleting of information from printed, recorded, and other sources.

Compared to most other methods of character assassination, erasing is not particularly common. After all, it is very hard to achieve. Even Pharaoh Akhenaten's images were not all destroyed in ancient Egypt. Controlling public memory generally takes a lot of power and resources; in societies with free speech it is almost impossible. Yet in a sense, erasing is the ultimate form of character assassination: one does not just eradicate a target's good name, but their entire existence (see Table 5.2).

HIERARCHY OF ATTACKS: HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL

One other way that we can distinguish among types of character attacks is by returning to analysis of the relationship between the target and the attacker (see Chapter 1). While some attacks are anonymous, when we can identify the attacker, we can often categorize them as having more, about the same, or less power than the target. Attacks that are launched by someone with about the same level of power as the target we call **horizontal**, while attacks where there is a power differential are **vertical**. Of course, there is no clear point between when the power difference is so great that it becomes vertical. Yet using this distinction can provide a useful way to think about the strategies and tools at an attacker's disposal. As we have already seen, too, the amount of power that a target has crucially influences how skillfully and sophisticatedly they can respond to a character attack.

Perhaps an example would help to illustrate this dynamic of character assassination. When U.S. President Bill Clinton nominated Clarence Thomas, then a federal circuit judge, to the Supreme Court, Anita Hill (see Image 5.3), who had worked for Thomas in the past, alleged that he had sexually harassed her. She was then called to testify in front of a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing about his possible nomination. In 1991, at the time of Thomas's confirmation hearings, Hill was a law professor at the University of Oklahoma. Thomas had been her supervisor at two previous jobs (Jacobs, 2018). In her testimony, Hill described how Thomas continually asked her out and used crude and sexual language in front of her. Hill testified for three days, under intense scrutiny from the Washington press and government. Thomas denied the accusations vehemently, saying they were unfair, racialized attacks on a black man. He described the hearings and controversy as "a high-tech lynching" (Kaplan, 1991). Despite this, the Senate still voted, 52–48, to confirm Thomas to the Supreme Court.

Many factors combine to make the treatment of Anita Hill a vertical character attack. For one, she was called in front of a powerful Senate committee without anyone to back her up. Hill lacked Thomas's legal power, and she did not have the support of a president seeking to get his pick, who would be the second black man on the highest court in the land, confirmed. She faced an imposing Senate Judiciary Committee hearing composed of fourteen white men (Viebeck, 2018). The men on the Judiciary Committee, including future president Joe Biden, treated her dismissively, often impugning her credibility as she testified. For instance, Senator John Danforth suggested Hill might have "erotomania," associated with delusions that someone powerful is in love with them (Armstrong, 1995; Gray, 2016).



IMAGE 5.3 Anita Hill testifying about sexual harassment in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Her opponents smeared her as mentally unstable and promiscuous

Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-65032

Second, she was recounting personal and intimate details related to moments when a man had asserted his power over her in a patriarchal culture that had not yet started to take sexual assault and harassment seriously. Third, the media largely dismissed Hill by framing the event as a political circus, denying the seriousness of her claims and undermining her power (Lipari, 1994; Kaplan, 1991). One political pundit described her famously as “a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty” (Gray, 2016; Phelps, 2018). She received threatening phone calls and death threats from members of the public (Hill, 2011). While Hill is a smart and capable professional, she still occupied a disempowered position here. Chapter 4 mentioned a similar case involving Brett Kavanaugh, now an associate justice on the Supreme Court. It will be further discussed in Chapter 13.

So, why might someone with considerably less power than another person launch a character attack? Won’t they just be hopelessly outmatched? Perhaps. But it may also be the case that this person feels a moral or ethical obligation to say something against this person, as in the case of many accusations of sexual harassment or assault. They may also be merely responding to an attack that was launched against them by a more powerful person. Finally, they may also feel desperate and latch onto character assassination as a long-shot, last-cause attempt to accomplish some type of strategic goal.

By contrast, when political candidates running for the same office attack each other, we are dealing with horizontal attacks. While certain candidates always have a bit more money in their campaign coffers or are more widely liked by the public, we are

generally talking about people with similar levels of power. Insults are common among members of the same party in the primary election system in the United States, where a group of candidates vie to be the candidate chosen by each party's national committee. In 2016, when senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio were both running for the Republican nomination, Rubio attacked Ted Cruz for being unable to speak Spanish during a debate. At one point during the debate, Ted Cruz was on the offensive, telling viewers that based on an interview on Univision, a well-known Spanish-language television network, Marco Rubio was weak on immigration. "Well, first of all, I don't know how he knows what I said on Univision because he doesn't speak Spanish," Rubio retorted in one of the most memorable lines from the debate (Hains, 2016). Cruz responded in Spanish, but his words were lost in a cacophony of candidates speaking over each other. In the days after the debate, the question of whether or not Ted Cruz spoke Spanish circulated through the media (Ross, 2016). The inability to speak fluent Spanish impacts the credibility of a senator from Texas, a state with a large Hispanic population, and a politician running for president in a country becoming increasingly diverse. Therefore, while we can understand why such an attack would have been strategic, we can also see this as a horizontal attack. Both were present on the stage at this debate, and Ted Cruz then had the chance, on national television, to attempt to respond to the allegation.

To summarize, horizontal attacks occur between people with approximately the same status, whereas vertical attacks happen when the two parties in question have different levels of social, political, or economic power. While this distinction cannot explain everything about a character attack, it can help analysts understand some of the dynamics at play when people attack each other.

TIMING OF ATTACKS: LIVE AND POSTMORTEM

Most of the character attacks we discuss in this chapter are aimed at living targets. However, the character of deceased individuals, their behavior and accomplishments, can also be assassinated. When this happens, we speak of **postmortem attacks**. We have already seen an example of this in Chapter 2, where we discussed the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten, whose images and buildings were vandalized or destroyed after his death. A similar practice existed in the Roman Empire. Once an emperor had passed away, the Senate could express its appreciation of his good reign by issuing a decree for his deification, granting him a place among the gods. But a dead emperor could also suffer *damnatio memoriae*, a curse on his memory. If this happened, his statues and busts were vandalized or destroyed, and his name was erased from public inscriptions. *Damnatio memoriae* could be the outcome of an official decree by the Senate, but also occurred spontaneously on the initiative of the soldiers or the common people, who might rise in anger to assault the images of an emperor they despised (Varner, 2004, pp. 1–20; Krüpe, 2011). Either way, such attacks functioned as a final verdict on a ruler who had not lived up to Roman expectations.

Pharaohs and emperors were usually only attacked posthumously because it would have been very risky to attack their character openly during their lifetime. The same

still holds for modern-day dictators. However, postmortem attacks are not limited to authoritarian regimes, nor do they always take the form of the vandalization of images.

In modern Western democracies, the characters of dead people are attacked all the time and in many ways. Memes and cartoons deriding deceased politicians, religious leaders and celebrities abound on the Internet. Allegations are made in posthumous biographies and documentaries. School textbooks portray particular historical individuals as villains. As long as a deceased individual still holds relevance in society—for instance because they still have a large fan base, because they represent a certain political or religious ideology, or because they feature prominently in the story a nation or community tells about itself—he or she remains a potential target for postmortem character attacks.

THE COMPLEXITY OF CHARACTER ATTACKS

As the earlier description of the types of character attacks makes clear, some are quite simple, whereas others require more information and development as arguments. We can arrange the types of attacks on a continuum from simple to complex. While there are likely many different ways to organize a typology of character attacks based on complexity, one way we can do so is by considering the amount of information needed by the audience to comprehend the attack. Often, the more complex attacks are based on a carefully conceptualized and strategic plan, whereas the simple attacks are knee-jerk reactions to issues. Complex attacks may also be more subtle and require the audience to fill in part of the argument (see Figure 5.1).

On the relatively simple end of the continuum are attacks like allegations in the form of simple accusations, name-calling, or cheap shots. These simple labels to most people are easy to understand. It might be helpful, for instance, to know the history of red baiting in the American labor movement, but one can understand the negative label of “communist” without a knowledge of the whole history. The term communist,

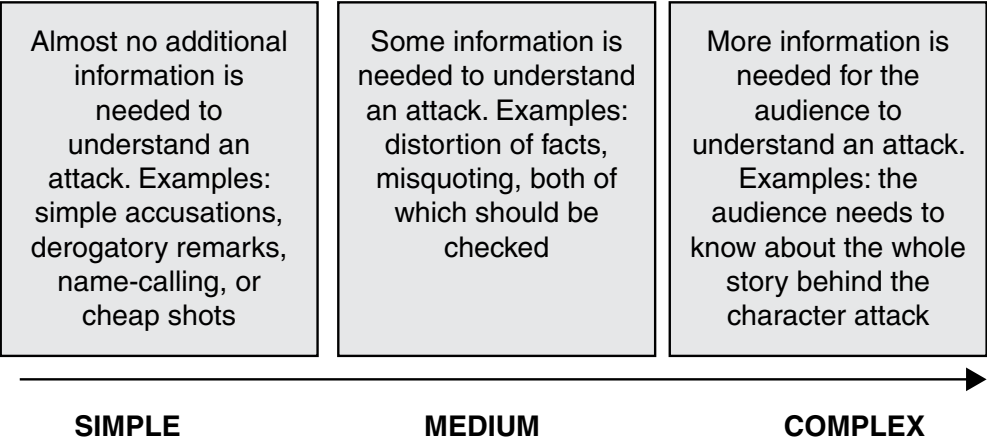


FIGURE 5.1 Character attacks: the complexity continuum

at least in many Western political cultures like the United States, often connotes corruption, uniformity, lack of critical thinking, and passivity instead of aggressive competition. These characteristics are understood to be at odds with what it takes to be successful in these political cultures.

Cheap shots are close to name-calling. This is a relatively simple yet potentially hurtful form of attack, which emphasizes an episode, an action, a statement, or a biographical fact in the life of a politician that alludes to this person's individual features, including but not limited to his or her credibility, competence, honesty, integrity, generosity, or decency. Such attacks can be either deliberate or spontaneous. They include critical, disparaging remarks, like for example, a quick comment by a candidate during a televised electoral debate that his opponent had problems with alcohol in the past. This may be a fact that took place twenty years ago, yet it can be used today to emotionally affect the viewing audience and harm the opponent.

The implications of such attacks vary along dimensions of political culture. The American political culture that the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville described in the 1830s has changed over the years, but in many ways, it has also remained the same. It typically includes a reverence for liberty, equality, democracy, individualism, the rule of law, nationalism, and capitalism. American political culture contains a number of core ideals and values. These general ideals are traditionally shared among many Americans. As a result, attackers may appeal to these ideas in their attack without directly explaining why the target fails to uphold these common values. The audience then supplies the missing reasoning step on their own. Different political cultures will appeal to different values. While the United States is an individualistic culture that typically prizes independent thought and competition, other cultures, such as ones based in Asia, will value communalism and acting for the good of the group (Wood, 2018, p. 191). In these cultures, calling someone a "capitalist" is a smear that indicates that they have been tainted or influenced by ideals antithetical to their culture. Co-cultures within a dominant culture will also have unique smears. For instance, among people affiliated with the United States Communist Party during the early Cold War, being called "bourgeois" was a smear that indicated that one was trying to live among the ideals of the dominant ruling class instead of participating in a struggle for economic justice (Keohane, 2018). Yet, this label would not have meant much to Americans who were not affiliated with the communists. Instead, it may have been a simple descriptor of class status.

Even the use of simple labels or names require some political and cultural knowledge. Obviously, this knowledge and some analysis will be required in an attack of "medium" complexity. Take, for example, falsifications, which are lies. By the time they are spread, they are often difficult to distinguish from facts. Unfounded rumors were circulating in 1987 about U.S. presidential candidate Michael Dukakis's alleged serious mental health problems. When Hillary Clinton was the first lady in the 1990s, rumors circulated about her promiscuous behavior and lethal actions: she was rumored to have a male lover, Vincent Foster, who had been a White House counsel and who—also allegedly—had been murdered on her orders. Falsifications are usually planned and tend to be more sophisticated than cheap shots (Smart & Shiraev, 2014). Yet because they are often hard to immediately distinguish from facts, character assassins use them

as a powerful means to associate the target's character with certain alleged immoral or inappropriate acts.

A common and surreptitious form of character attack is misquoting, which is about taking a phrase or sentence out of context. Francis Bacon, the 17th-century English philosopher and statesman, was a frequent target of character attacks. His opponents deliberately misquoted his philosophical writings. Today misquoting is very common. Deliberate misquoting often pursues the goal of attacking someone's reputation because the audience is supposed to read the compromising words allegedly belonging to that person and make a judgment call about their validity.

On the other end of the spectrum, the complex end, we find tactics like ridicule. Humor, and especially satire, is a complex phenomenon that often requires a fair amount of background knowledge to fully comprehend. Take for example the character portrayed by Stephen Colbert in the *Colbert Report*, a very popular Comedy Central television show that ran from 2005 to 2014 (Rolling Stone, 2009). Colbert's character, confusingly also named Stephen Colbert, was "a right-wing, bloviating pundit who was both outrageous and adorable" (McClennen, 2014). He was loosely supposed to be a satire of conservative media commentators like Glenn Beck and Bill O'Reilly. As a journalist pointed out,

In-character satire is a very unique form of comedy because it demands that its audience thinks critically. Jon Stewart, for instance, does straight satire. While he uses irony and puns, he speaks as himself. Colbert, in contrast, added another layer of complexity to his satire because he embodied an exaggerated version of what he was critiquing.

(McClennen, 2014)

Colbert himself said this about the character:

Jon [Stewart] deconstructs the news in a really brilliant comedic style. I take the sausage backwards, and I restuff the sausage. We deconstruct, but then we don't show anybody our deconstruction. We reconstruct—we falsely construct the hypocrisy. And I embody the bullshit until hopefully you can smell it.

(qtd. in *Rolling Stone*, 2009)

Thus, Colbert's satirical embodiment of this persona was a complex character smear of these right-wing media pundits. And as scholars like Robert Hariman (2008) have pointed out, for all of its complexity, satire is a powerful way to speak truth to power.

It is worth noting that often the audience has to do some critical thinking and deduction of their own in order to understand the full implications of a particular character attack. This is because the attacker might use innuendo or merely hint at the attack instead of stating it directly. When Marco Rubio said that Donald Trump had "small hands" during the 2016 Republican primary race, he was clearly alluding to something else, which we tend to equate with manhood. Merriam Webster's dictionary notes that **innuendo** is an oblique allusion, or an equivocal reflection on character or reputation. In other words, innuendo is often used to disparage someone's

character! Innuendo can also be used to appear polite while relaying positive information intended to be interpreted negatively. As social psychologists Kervyn, Bergsieker, and Fiske (2012) describe, it can be the case that listeners can receive positive information and still draw negative conclusions. They term this the *innuendo effect*. Suppose someone describes a person as one “who knows how to party.” Would you prefer to have this person to work on a serious project? Or think of a boss described to you as “rules-oriented.” Although both descriptions contain positive descriptors, in some contexts they can convey a negative impression: a party-loving person is not your top choice for the next project and a rules-obsessed boss is not the one with whom you discuss creative innovations.

Another way that an attacker might create a complex attack is by leaving one “step” or logical link unstated. Aristotle termed arguments such as these “enthymemes.” Enthymemes are “abbreviated arguments” wherein key components have to be inferred by the audience. It becomes the job of the listener to fill in the rest of the argument given the cues from the speaker. The audience accomplishes this task by using shared beliefs, attitudes, and values (Campbell & Huxman, 2003). To take an example, in the arguments that said that Barack Obama was born in Kenya, often left unstated were racist assumptions about blackness as difference and the implication that Obama was not “one of us.” While sometimes these implications were stated directly, often the audience was asked to fill those in on their own. To return to the example of Ted Cruz not speaking Spanish from earlier in the chapter, lurking below the insult is an accusation that Cruz might be a “hypocrite” for claiming the label of Hispanic conservative, or perhaps even a “racist” for antipathy toward the language. But Rubio did not come out and say this; it was merely implied. In order for this to emerge from the charge, one needs to be aware of the social values and norms of the broader U.S. political community. Rubio implied that Cruz was not a “true Hispanic candidate,” that he was impure, and perhaps even incompetent as a politician. That the argument came from Rubio, a Cuban American, was also important. By using such a tactic, Rubio positioned himself as the authentic leader of the large Hispanic voting bloc. Thus, innuendo and enthymemes are powerful and complex ways to launch character attacks. They are also very common, as they may shield the attacker from a backlash for being too mean or nasty. Again, situating character attacks on a continuum from simple to complex can help us understand more fully how they work for an audience.

This chapter has identified some of the common ways that character is attacked. We identified the dimensions of personality, behavior, and affiliation as typical types of allegations, and we also went through a typology of attacks. We also explained that other important dimensions of attacks include considering whether they are horizontal or vertical and how complex they are. Armed with these dimensions, we can analyze the content and types of character attacks that we find in our societies.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- There are three aspects of an individual that can become the focus of character attacks: their *personality*, their *behavior*, and their *social identity*. Many character

attacks take place in the form of allegations, but those are not the only way to assassinate character. There are at least six other ways to damage or destroy a person's reputation: name-calling, ridiculing, fearmongering, exposing, disgracing, and erasing.

- Allegations are spread without factual proof attached to them. Insults do not require factual proof either, thus becoming one of the easiest to use in a character attack. Name-calling usually is a quick, short insult. Another widespread and often very effective method of character assassination is ridicule, which is purposeful and contemptuous exaggeration or distortion in a comedic context.
- Fearmongering—or deliberately arousing public fear or alarm about a particular individual or an issue—turns them into a threat, someone to be hated and feared. This occurs when attackers manage to create feelings of anxiety in their audience toward a target.
- A target is exposed when compromising material about their private views or actions is deliberately made public. Exposing thus goes a step further than making allegations, in the sense that “evidence” is presented. When someone is disgraced, their good name is publicly renounced. Disgracing is the pursuit of a person's loss of respect, honor, or esteem. Erasing from collective memory or simply erasing involves a systematic deleting of information about an individual from printed and other sources.
- Horizontal attacks occur between people with approximately the same amount of power, whereas vertical attacks happen when the two parties in question have different levels of social, political, or economic power.
- The character of deceased individuals, their behavior and accomplishments, can also be assassinated. When this happens, we speak of postmortem attacks.
- While there are likely many different ways to organize a typology of character attacks based on complexity, one way we can do so is by considering the amount of information needed by the audience to comprehend the attack. The types of attacks can be placed on a continuum from simple to complex. Often, the more complex attacks are based on a carefully conceptualized and strategic plan whereas the simple attacks are knee-jerk reactions to issues.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Is it helpful for analysts of character assassination to classify different types of attacks given that so many can overlap? Why or why not?
2. What goal can a specialist accomplish by studying various types of character attacks?
3. Which of the types of allegations (personality, behavior, affiliation) do you think are most likely to damage or destroy an individual's character? Why?
4. Can you think of an example where someone with a lot less power successfully launched an attack and assassinated the character of someone more powerful than they were? What made them so successful?
5. Identify a character attack based on an enthymeme that you see in the media or on TV. What are the missing steps or premises? What information would you need to

fill them in? Do you think most people will be able to fill them in as the attacker wanted?

6. Compare the use of cheap shots and innuendo in character attacks. What are similarities and differences?

KEY TERMS

Allegations Accusatory statements, either true or false, about an individual's flaws or shortcomings.

Disgracing The pursuit of a person's loss of respect, honor, or esteem.

Fearmongering The deliberate arousing of public fear or alarm about a particular individual or an issue.

Horizontal attacks Character attacks launched by someone with about the same level of power as the target.

Innuendo An oblique allusion, or an equivocal reflection on character or reputation.

Name-calling A quick, short insult.

Postmortem attacks Attacks against deceased individuals, their personality traits, character, accomplishments, and behavior.

Ridicule Purposeful and contemptuous exaggeration or distortion in a comical context.

Social identity A person's perceived social position and group affiliation.

Vertical attacks Character attacks launched by someone with a significant power differential between the attacker and the target.

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Means and Venues of Character Attacks

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe the complex role of the media in character attacks.
- Explain media practices and processes in the context of character attacks.
- Identify media strategies to facilitate character attacks.
- Suggest practical applications of the study of the means and venues of character assassination.

“Pull your pants up black people, I was on TV in the 80s,” said comedian Hannibal Buress to his audience during his late-night show on October 16, 2014, at the Trocadero Theatre in Philadelphia. During the bit, Buress was referring to actor Bill Cosby’s regular habit of telling black youth in America how to behave appropriately. Buress criticized the man frequently cited as “America’s Dad” by saying, “Yeah, but you raped women, Bill Cosby, so that kind of brings you down a couple notches.” The comedian then encouraged his audience to Google “Bill Cosby rape” when they got home (Zuckerman, 2014). Word of the comedian’s performance spread rapidly in the media with many people wondering how Cosby had managed to maintain a “Teflon image” despite more than a decade of sexual abuse accusations (McQuade, 2014; NBC News, 2014).

A month later, Cosby’s social media team came up with a crisis plan and created a meme generator asking Twitter followers to meme the actor. Twitter users generated memes calling Cosby “a rapist” and making other references to the sexual abuse accusations against him (Worland, 2014). The hashtag #CosbyMeme backfired and was soon removed from Cosby’s account. The viral video of Buress’s stand-up joke helped draw attention to the claims directed at Cosby.

By October 24, 2015, nearly sixty women had accused Bill Cosby of sexual abuse. In 2017, Ben’s Chili Bowl in Washington, D.C., a restaurant regularly visited at that time by the actor, removed a mural that featured him (see Image 6.1). (The wall now shows a series of portraits that include Barack Obama, Donnie Simpson, and Chuck Brown.)



IMAGE 6.1 The Bill Cosby mural outside of D.C. restaurant Ben's Chili Bowl

Source: Photo by Ted Eytan, CC BY-SA 2.0

The owners also removed Cosby from the wall at their other location in Arlington, Virginia, after a petition (Beaujon, Sidman, & Cartagena, 2017). In 2018, Cosby was found guilty of aggravated indecent assault and sentenced to a prison term.

These examples show us the power of media as a tool for character attacks among other things. Although in earlier chapters we have already seen many examples involving the media, this chapter discusses the role of mediated character attacks from different angles and in more detail.

As we know, projecting a positive image has always been important to public figures. Egyptian pharaohs and Roman emperors had impressive statues of themselves put up around their realms. After the 15th century, monarchs and popes in Europe and later in other parts of the world began to use print media for promulgating official directives. They also used pamphlets and periodicals to spread information and increase their public exposure in distant locales. At the same time, people personally attacked rulers and public figures in pamphlets and other printed materials.

The development of radio and television in the 20th century provided public figures and their opponents with new opportunities for exposure and criticism. Authoritarian political regimes mobilized media to promote and defend government policies as well as government leaders. In democracies, multiple public relations agencies and political consultants found new business by zooming in on appealing personal characteristics of their clients while downplaying some unattractive pages from their biographies. In the age of television, especially after the 1960s, when a TV set became affordable to almost every family in developed countries, impression management became a crucial skill for political contenders, celebrities, and government officials.

As a result, television has personalized politics and facilitated the rise of the society of self-disclosure, in which political leaders use the media to create intimate forms of self-presentation and lay bare some aspects of their personal life. The ability to project a credible image on television and protect it from attacks remains crucial: prominent

public figures become convenient targets of character attacks, especially during election campaigns.

REPUTATIONAL RISKS IN THE INTERNET AGE

For many, the Internet has increased the amount of public exposure and visibility. To be positively regarded, many public figures are increasingly expected to maintain an active online profile and constantly invest in their media presence (Weber Shandwick, 2015). Politicians often have to use a more personal tone of communication with their supporters and their electorate via direct messaging and feedback. Former U.S. President Barack Obama was among the first world leaders to use social media to bypass traditional journalists and connect directly with his supporters. During the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential campaigns, both parties actively used social media. A similar trend has been observed in many other countries.

This tendency associated with an increasing exposure of public officials has in turn multiplied reputational risks for politicians, celebrities, company managers, and average citizens. **Reputational risk** refers to the degree of a threat to character-based reputations that can potentially develop into a crisis. We will discuss this concept in more detail in Chapter 8. At least three main reasons for such vulnerabilities exist. The first is the speed with which information is shared. The second is the volume of information that is spread. And the third is the malevolence behind attacks (Dezenhall, 2014).

Social media tend to expose an individual's personal life. Higher exposure of public figures is associated with increased social scrutiny, which easily turns into outrage when leaders fail the hopes and expectations of their constituency and supporters. In September 2017, after @tedcruz, the official Twitter account of Texas Senator Ted Cruz, liked a pornographic tweet, Cruz began trending on Twitter and became the target of viral mockery. The mishap was explained as "an honest mistake" by a staff member who had accidentally hit the wrong button (O'Keefe & Selk, 2017). But the reputational damage to the Senator had been done, even though he was apparently not involved in this incident.

Most similar online events tend to trigger a chain reaction of comments. In October 2016, FBI investigators seized a laptop belonging to former New York Congressman Anthony Weiner as part of an investigation into a case involving Weiner sending lewd photos to a teenager. On that laptop, investigators discovered emails forwarded to Weiner by his estranged wife, Huma Abedin, then vice chair of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. This prompted the FBI to reopen the investigation into how Clinton used a private email server a few days before the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Yglesias, 2016). Supporters of Clinton maintain that this event alone could have tipped public opinion and the elections in favor of Trump. Weiner's sexting affair further entangled Clinton in her email investigations at exactly the wrong time (Berman, 2019).

As these cases demonstrate, both mistakes and media reactions can harm reputations. While communication technologies have created more ways for image management, they have also equipped adversaries and rivals with new tools to attack and denounce

public figures and powerful people who face additional risks. They include various types of faux pas, gaffes, and mismanaged performances that can be conveniently exaggerated and exposed.

What should attackers know before launching an attack? What should defenders know for effective resistance? To answer these questions, we first need to understand the concepts of agenda-setting, priming, and framing. We will address these concepts next.

AGENDA-SETTING AND PRIMING

In April 1979, when his approval ratings were low, U.S. President Jimmy Carter's small boat was "attacked" by a swamp rabbit while he was fishing in Georgia (Morgenstern, 2018). The animal jumped in the water and swam toward his boat while being chased by hounds. A story on the incident was published on the front page of *The Washington Post* with the title "Bunny Goes Bugs: Rabbit Attacks President" (Jackson, 1979). Jokes, parodies, and sarcastic remarks followed. The comedy *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which includes scenes of a killer rabbit slaying humans, led to jokes about Carter as having "fended off a killer rabbit." Soon the rabbit case, sensationalized by the press, had become a metaphor for Carter's ill-fated presidency and might have contributed to the lacking enthusiasm of his supporters and his electoral defeat in November 1980 (see Image 6.2).

Of the innumerable events of a given day, only a few are chosen for coverage in the regular news or in special reports. As we mentioned earlier, editors and journalists often exercise their control over determining what becomes news and what does not.

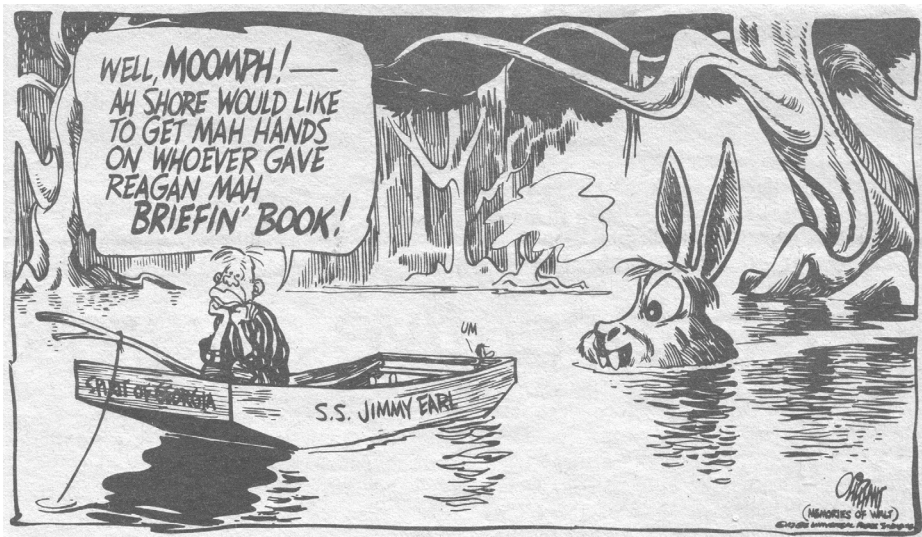


IMAGE 6.2 In this 1980 cartoon about the rabbit incident, cartoonist Pat Oliphant shows Jimmy Carter as weak and easily defeated by Reagan

Source: Creative Commons license: CC BY-SA 4.0

This process is called **agenda-setting** and because of it, the media can choose the topics based on their perceived importance. Therefore, the media have power to set agendas and communicate the importance of specific issues to the public by suggesting what they should focus on or think about.

The media can also take issues off the public agenda by *not* covering them. Americans in the 1930s had little knowledge, for instance, that President Franklin Roosevelt was paralyzed and could walk only with extreme difficulty. In the 1960s they had no idea that President John Kennedy had multiple extramarital affairs. Journalists tended not to report on personal details because they considered such things private and not newsworthy (Kalb, 2001). Even if a president's affairs were known to some of his staffers and several journalists, the public did not learn about them until after the president was out of office or dead. For example, Nan Britton released her tell-all book about President Warren Harding (1865–1923) only after his death (Little, 2012). The story of the rise and fall of Senator Gary Hart marked the tipping point when candidates' private lives became public, and the politics increasingly went tabloid. We discussed this case in the opening chapter.

Priming is an extension of the agenda-setting process. It is about the influence of some preceding information on how the audience reacts to other news. Media messages can “prime” the audience to trust some information more and accept some other information less. The more prominent an issue in the news stream, the greater the impact of that issue on political attitudes (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). For example, during elections, watching television news coverage of violent crime causes people to weigh a candidate's views on the death penalty more heavily compared to before they watched the crime news. How does priming work? When a certain idea is primed by a message, it tends to, it tends to activate a chain of associations in memory related to the message. Thus, certain media messages can prompt various schemas of interpretations, stereotypes, and prejudices capable of influencing the ways individuals make judgements of other people (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009).

Priming of a message is one of the mechanisms of misinformation and character assassination. For example, the media can dedicate a great deal of coverage to a mistake or a gaffe by a public official. Later the name of this official is for some time mainly associated with this mistake. U.S. President Ford during the 1976 presidential debates carelessly mentioned the absence of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe (which in fact, was under control of communist governments loyal to the Soviet Union). This blunder led the media to focus on Ford's apparent incompetence and shallowness. Researchers argue that repeated misinformation increases the familiarity and believability of falsehoods (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012; Weaver, Garcia, Schwarz, & Miller, 2007). Explanation for this comes from the *illusory-truth effect*, in which prior exposure increases perceived accuracy. This effect generalizes across information types, such as fake-news headlines (Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2018). In the context of character assassination, priming often works because it suggests audiences follow quick and easy thinking and labeling instead of exerting cognitive effort. As in many other cases, the less knowledgeable are a desirable audience for character attackers.

FRAMING AND LABELING

In 2014 Cho Hyun-ah, a top female executive at Korean Air, had to resign in disgrace after a barrage of media reports accusing her of being capricious and egotistical. The media focused on a single episode. While aboard a plane, before the take-off, she got extremely angry with a flight attendant in first class when he offered her a snack in a bag, not on a plate. She even demanded that the plane return to the airport gate. The message generated by the media was that top executives can be tough on their employees, but they should not be that arrogant and selfish. Besides agenda-setting and priming, the media provide viewers with media frames, a form and context for interpreting the news. Studies on media frames examine *how* issues are presented in the news (Entman, 1993). News stories represent selective constructions of reality that depend on the choices made by writers, journalists, and editors. The “framed” reality created by media may result in lasting opinions and electoral choices of the viewing and listening audience.

The process of framing refers to rhetorical strategies and techniques that enable communicators to highlight some aspects of reality while obscuring or even ignoring others. There is a clear distinction between the power to set the agenda and the power to persuade citizens about the importance or meaning of a political event. For example, information about a business executive’s private life may be available, but it may not be enough to make judgments about the merits of his character. Framing encourages making such judgments. When Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin (b. 1964) was running as a vice-presidential candidate in 2008, the media often focused on a barrage of embarrassing personal problems that her family members had. This negative focus was likely affecting public opinion of Palin (Myers, 2008). Through framing, the media can define problems, attribute causes, provide moral evaluation, and even prescribe actions, such as voting (Entman, 2003). Research suggests that frames work by making particular opinions and decisions more relevant to the judgment process. Framing can promote perceptions and interpretations that benefit one candidate and hurt others (Scheufele, 2014; Hertog & McLeod, 2001). As you can see, framing can be another effective tool of character assassination.

In television commercials, magazine ads, or memetic culture, words often are secondary to images. An image can unpack and summarize difficult ideas and concepts. One of the most quoted examples referring to images and public opinion is the 1960 television debates between Kennedy and Nixon. Although both candidates argued well, Kennedy, according to observers, looked fresher, sharper, and younger, compared to the tired and unshaven Nixon (Kraus, 2001).

However, images can also be selective, depending on their production techniques and presentation biases, including lighting, camera angle, cropping, and editing. Images—like imaginary perceptual frames—either represent or distort the reality and mislead their audience. On August 28, 2014, President Barack Obama wore a tan suit while he held a live press conference on increasing the U.S. military response against the Islamic State in Syria. His appearance on television led to large amounts of press coverage and social media criticism. In the United States, a light-colored suit is not considered as formal as a dark suit. Congressman Peter King pointed to a “lack of

seriousness,” and called the suit unpresidential. Obama’s critics joked about the tan suit, playing on his slogans “yes we can” and “the audacity of hope” by turning them into “yes we tan” and “the audacity of taupe” (Farzan, 2019). In dwelling on this episode, some news media outlets provided a frame for dismissing the Obama administration’s efforts in Syria.

News coverage also features *episodic* and *thematic* framing (Iyengar, 1991). Episodic frames focus on isolated events or individual actions without in-depth contextual elaboration. Reports in East Asian countries about the origins of COVID-19 in 2020 contained references to Chinese leaders as “liars” and “cowards” for allegedly hiding the truth about the coming pandemic. Thematic frames, on the other hand, understand events in a broad context, as consequences of general societal trends or policy matters. During the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, several news outlets in the United States posted a picture of President Trump playing golf on the background of the gruesome numbers of the virus-related deaths in New York City. The framing of this message was most likely to demonstrate that the president was a heartless man with no concern for the unfolding health crisis.

One of the powerful components of framing is labeling, which we began discussing in Chapter 5. As you should remember, labels are symbols used to tag and categorize individuals. Labels and nicknames later morph into familiar phrases, jokes, or memes—which can obscure a serious discussion. Social labeling is a powerful tool of persuasion that can lead to further stigmatization. Twitter has facilitated the use of real-time framing and labeling in a political discourse. Character assassination can prove handy when it prevents the dissemination of unwanted messages and silences dissenting voices. A corporation dealing with a whistle-blower issue may elect to discredit the messenger and torpedo their credibility. For example, cigarette maker Brown & Williamson retaliated with a ruthless smear campaign against whistle-blower Jeffrey Wigand that publicly exaggerated claims of him being a raging alcoholic, a wife beater, and a pathological liar (Brenner, 1996).

During the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, John Kerry’s heroism as a swift boat commander during the Vietnam War suddenly came under media fire. A group of Vietnam Navy veterans and former prisoners of war formed a political organization, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (later known as Swift Vets and POWs for Truth), to oppose Kerry’s candidacy for the presidency. The group produced a series of television ads and a book, *Unfit for Command*, to discredit Kerry’s military record and condemn his subsequent antiwar activities. Many believe that the smear campaign coupled with the slow reaction by the politician’s public relations team ensured Kerry’s defeat (Manjoo, 2008). Since the 2004 election, the term “swiftboating” has become a common expression for a smear campaign focused on questioning someone’s credibility or patriotism. It has also become a communication technique claiming to expose truth while in fact attempting to taint someone’s image and forcing them to drop out of the race. For example, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (b. 1943) said he felt he was being “Romney-boated” during a presidential campaign stop on in 2012 (Gabriel, 2012).

THE USE AND MISUSE OF FRAMING

Ever since the invention of print, caricatures have been a powerful tool of ridiculing and visual framing. Cartoons and drawings are among the most common means of ridicule and cultural subversion. For example, in mid-2019, the international edition of the *New York Times* featured a drawing of former U.S. President Donald Trump wearing a kippa and leading Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu like a dog on a leash. British Prime Minister Blair often appeared in caricatures as a poodle on a leash held by U.S. President George Bush. In 2020, the president of the World Health Organization emerged in caricatures on a leash in the hands of the Chinese president. You can find many similar examples of cartoons in the world's media throughout history to portray a political leader's dependency on foreign power.

LET'S DISCUSS

In democratic countries, people enjoy many liberties, including freedom of speech. This is not about saying anything you want, wherever you want. In these countries, legal rules limit our right to speak, broadcast, and publish. We discussed slander, for example, in earlier chapters. Putting aside legal rules, let's turn to ethical standards in the context of character attacks.

Charlie Hebdo, a French satirical non-conformist magazine, is known for its radical cartoons. The magazine is part of a venerable tradition in French journalism going back to the scandal sheets that denounced Queen Marie-Antoinette prior to the French Revolution. Back in the 18th century, the target of such satire was the royal family and corruption at the court at Versailles. Today, the targets are politicians, the police, E.U. policies, and religion. Serious controversy arose over the publication's edition of February 9, 2006. Under the title "*Mahomet débordé par les intégristes*" ("Muhammad overwhelmed by fundamentalists"), the front page showed a cartoon of a weeping Prophet Muhammad saying, "it's hard being loved by jerks." Terrorists have targeted the magazine twice, in 2011 and 2015. Both attacks were presumed to be in response to a number of controversial Muhammad cartoons it published. In November 2011, *Hebdo*'s office was fire-bombed, and its website hacked (BBC, 2011). The attacks were presumed to be linked to its decision to rename the edition of November 3, 2011, *Charia Hebdo*, with Muhammad listed as the "editor-in-chief." In 2015, 12 people were killed, including the magazine's publishing director and several prominent cartoonists. In 2020, a teacher in France was killed by a lone extremist for explaining to his pupils what the *Hebdo* case was all about.

1. What do you think the editors at *Charlie Hebdo* were trying to communicate with these caricatures?
2. In your opinion, is it ethical for a magazine to publish a caricature of a religious figure?
3. What should be an appropriate, non-violent, response to address the feelings and concerns of those offended by this caricature?
4. What do you think would have happened in a country not known for protecting freedom of speech?

Photos or videos can be doctored or deliberately used by journalists or bloggers to show a politician at an inconvenient time or in an awkward situation. In 2002, a doctored photo of U.S. President George W. Bush holding a children's book upside down circulated widely after he appeared at the George Sanchez Charter School in Houston. In reality, the President never held the book upside down during the visit. The alteration, however, made Bush look stupid. Such photoshopped images can cause the public to question reality and serve as viable means for character assassination.

In the age of “photoshopped reality,” anyone can now alter an image on a home computer. These days, we enter the world of **deepfake** or a technique in which a person in an existing image or video is replaced with someone else's image. There is often little chance of immediate detection, especially if time for analysis is short or there is not enough context provided. Deepfakes, of course, can be used for entertainment. However, their misuse can have serious legal and reputational consequences.

MEMES AS CHARACTER ATTACKS

Memes, which are words and symbols representing a particular phenomenon or theme, are a quintessential product of participative Internet culture. Memes spread rapidly online from person to person via emails, forums, imageboards, and social media. In the United States, memes can be traced back to a traditional activist strategy of **subvertisement** or a practice of making parodies of corporate and political advertisements. For example, in 1972, the logo of Richard Nixon's re-election campaign posters was subverted with two x's in Nixon's name (as in the Exxon logo) to suggest that the Republican Party was owned by big corporations (Samoilenko, 2018).

Memes can have an impact on political discourse and public opinion as visual political frames (Milner, 2016). Many are now considered part of political communication strategies, especially to appeal to a younger audience (Grullón Paz, 2019). Internet memes create a common frame and reference points for political action. This was observed, for example, during the days of the movement called Occupy Wall Street in 2011. Pictures of young people holding up sheets of paper describing their economic

hardships and declaring “I am the 99 percent” started on Tumblr and then went viral as the Occupy movement continued.

Politicians of all parties have been used as fodder for the meme culture, which has been helped along by the explosion of social media and other online technologies. Photoshopped memes have become a norm. For instance, protestors in Hong Kong flooded the streets in 2019 to voice dissent against the actions of the government which was eroding citizens’ civil liberties. In one meme, dissenters photoshopped Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam’s (see Image 6.3) head on actress Uma Thurman’s body on the iconic poster for Quentin Tarantino’s franchise *Kill Bill*. In this meme, “Bill” referred not to a person, but to a proposed piece of legislation, which would have allowed accused criminals to be extradited to mainland China, which is known for its violation of human rights (Ives, 2019; Li & Ives, 2019).

There are two motivations for sharing content online: expressive acts of political participation and games. Memes can evolve, mutate, and diffuse as they travel through different discursive environments. For example, scholars examined the trajectory of the Obama Hope Poster used during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2017). An image of the presidential candidate started as a centralized communication strategy only to later become re-appropriated for competing narratives. Nearly half of the replications included Obama as a murderer and sociopath.



IMAGE 6.3 Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam found herself the target of character attacks in the form of memes after she supported restrictive legislation

Source: Voice of America, Photo by Iris Tong

Memes often combined Christopher Nolan’s violent incarnation of the Joker character with fascist iconography. This reflects an extreme re-interpretation of the “hope and change” narrative inserted into apocalyptic contexts.

STRATEGIES FOR MEDIATED ATTACKS

Character assassination campaigns are designed and executed by teams of strategists and communicators. These campaigns focus on understanding what various audiences think, feel, and hope for (Botan, 2018). Strategic attackers seek to manipulate the opinions and actions of various groups and to turn them against the target. These campaigns include *production* and *intervention* strategies as orchestrated attempts to either create mediated character assassination events (flash mobs, scandals, reputational crises, etc.) or intervene in ongoing situation to hijack media and the public agenda. We will next discuss three cardinal strategies for mediated campaigns of character assassination: provocation, contamination, and obliteration (see Table 6.1).

When the Nixon campaign in 1972 tarred their opponent George McGovern with the “three As”: “amnesty, abortion, and acid,” this offensive labeling was not necessarily meant to scare away McGovern diehard supporters. It was likely to stir the emotions of Nixon’s supporters or the undecided. **Provocation strategies** aim to manufacture a highly mediated character assassination event or amplify crisis situations involving the target. The goal is to make mediated events resonate with multiple communities, strengthen their attitudes against the target, and incite anger, outrage, or an outburst of moral righteousness.

Staging a *scandal* is the most popular means of provocation to gain media attention and generate outrage among a target group (Haller, Michael, & Kraus, 2018). Scandals are usually linked to a character-based issue or some moral conflict. These events create serious legitimacy issues for the target and lower his or her credibility to a degree that is unacceptable to the public. Media dramatization techniques include showing or reconstructing the original transgression, staging the main actor’s reactions to the revelation, establishing a moral standard, quoting in forms of confessions, apologies,

TABLE 6.1 Strategies for mediated character attacks

Strategies	Description
Provocation	Creating a character assassination event in the media or amplifying a target’s reputational crisis. Example: retweeting a political candidate’s gaffe to lower their support.
Contamination	Spreading rumors and other misinformation throughout a social network. Example: sending a “fake news” article to your parents in hopes that they’ll share it with their friends.
Obliteration	Erasing the memory or artifacts related to a public figure. Example: removing historical statues of a controversial Confederate Civil War general.

and regrets, etc. Attack producers know how to exploit dramatization effects to get media attention.

Data breaches, leaks, and hacks can cause scandals of historic magnitude. In 2018, a massive leak caused a major scandal after it revealed that Cambridge Analytica harvested the personal data of millions of people's Facebook profiles without their consent and used it for political advertising. In May 2019, Austria's vice chancellor and head of the far-right Freedom Party, Heinz-Christian Strache, announced his resignation from both offices. The scandal started with a leaked video that showed the vice chancellor, seemingly drunk, offering lucrative government contracts in exchange for campaign donations to a woman posing as a Russian oligarch's niece. The scandal caused the collapse of the Austrian governing coalition (Deutsche Welle, 2019).

Public figures entangled in a scandal can be suddenly attacked by many motivated actors who can capitalize on the downfall of reputations. One person's crisis can be "someone else's meal ticket" (Dezenhall, 2014). Social media have expanded opportunities to co-create scandals. Before launching an attack, campaign producers invest time in learning about networked audiences. The plan is to hand the message over to the third-party members and encourage them to spread harmful content about the target in a snowball effect. There are always other stakeholders (bloggers, activists, competitors, etc.) who have a legitimate interest in bringing down a targeted individual.

Contamination strategies involve conscious efforts to spread misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories. The idea is to introduce an issue into an already existing consensus about the target in a clandestine manner. The *poisoning the well* approach is especially instrumental for this purpose. The attacker here deliberately introduces irrelevant adverse information about a target with the intention of discrediting or ridiculing them (Garrett, 2019). The mainstream media's dependence on sensationalism, or novelty over newsworthiness, makes such attacks effective. For instance, in mid-August 2016, rumors spread about Hillary Clinton's declining health and mental soundness. They claimed that she was both physically weak and mentally impaired, suffering from Parkinson's disease, dementia, and seizures. These unfounded claims became a topic of discussion on Fox News, Jimmy Kimmel Live, and NBC News, as well as at Donald Trump rallies (Cheadle, 2016). Similar claims circulated about candidate Joe Biden's health and advanced age in 2020.

Strategic attackers engage both authentic audience members and social bots to spread negative information about the target. Botnet attacks and *astroturf* (or fake grassroots) campaigns have been used by governments, businesses, and lobbying groups (Bailey & Samoilenko, 2018). Attackers conduct audience analysis to determine what specific messages will provoke a group and then create and share provocative content that elicits action (Wanless & Berk 2017, 2020). Attackers infiltrate online communities to spread conspiracy theories or fake stories. One of the most bizarre attacks targeted Bill Gates in 2020. He was accused of having an evil intention to take advantage of a vaccination campaign to control the population through microchips injected in the human body (Sharwod, 2020). Persuasive content of such actions is often amplified across multiple websites for seemingly organic placement in newsfeeds. The origin of provocative content is normally obfuscated. Finally, attackers reach out to partisan media to assure traditional media coverage.

Obliteration strategies aim at purging the memory and public significance of a living individual. We discussed erasing as a form of character assassination in Chapter 5. The slow pace of such character poisoning is often based on a long-term plan. It resembles lingchi or “death by a thousand cuts,” which Imperial China used as a capital punishment (Brook, Bourgon, & Blue, 2008). Both a physical and a psychological punishment, lingchi dishonored an individual by taking away their hope of a life after death, causing shame and embarrassment. Obliteration appears in various forms of historical revisionism, or re-interpretation of history or a historical figure’s life. Politics and ideology often feed revisionism. For example, as a result of policies to obliterate the legacy of communism in Ukraine, 1,320 statues of Lenin were dismantled, according to the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (Ukrainska Pravda, 2017). In recent years, Wikipedia has become a convenient place for smear and obliteration practices, including falsifications of a person’s early biography or forged evidence about an individual’s alleged embarrassing affiliations or actions (Burrell, 2013).

Many symbolic acts of historic revisionism are public relations decisions directed to address public concerns. For example, following the 2011 Penn State sexual abuse scandal, the bronze statue of Joe Paterno, former head coach of the Penn State football team, was removed because it had become “a source of division and an obstacle to healing” (Van Natta, 2012). In the same vein, in 2017, Ben’s Chili Bowl, a Washington, D.C. landmark, painted over its mural of Bill Cosby after the sex scandal mentioned earlier, despite its long-term relationship with the comedian.

Throughout history, various modes of communication have made a tremendous impact on culture and society becoming intertwined with politics, war, and religion. Internet technologies have transformed our social experiences. Formerly passive readers have become active contributors, making peer-influenced media a paramount source of information. Media outlets are no longer a neutral mediator between social institutions, but an active player that transforms reality according to its own logic. A common critique of highly mediated society is that media logic has altered the notion of truth and leaned toward “truthiness.” This word represents a general attitude toward media reality in American society, which is divided between two camps of people—those who “think with their head” and those who “know with their heart” (Mooney, 2012). As a result, this reality is not only mediated, but *mediatized* and often becomes “more important than the actual reality” (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 238). Therefore, in deeply mediatized societies, media organizations play a central role and can impose their agenda on the rest of society. In today’s global world, media practices combined with changes in culture and society have created a media ecosystem intertwined with politics, in which incivility and character assassination practices abound.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The discussion of the role of the media in character attacks begins with exposure and visibility. Projecting a positive self-image has always been important to public figures.
- Television and the Internet have personalized politics and facilitated the rise of the society of self-disclosure, in which political leaders use the media to create an

intimate form of self-presentation and lay bare some aspects of their self or their personal life.

- Reputational risk refers to the measure or degree of potentially negative publicity of an individual. To be positively regarded, public figures—with rare exceptions—ought to maintain an active online profile, and constantly invest in their media presence.
- While communication media have created more ways for image management, they have also equipped adversaries and rivals with new tools to attack and denounce public figures and powerful people who face additional risks.
- Editors and journalists often exercise agenda-setting: they determine what becomes news and what does not. Priming is an extension of the agenda-setting process. Media messages can “prime” the audience by repeating certain information frequently and thus making it more accessible in short-term thinking. News stories represent selective constructions of reality that depend on the choices made by writers, journalists, and editors. The “framed” reality created by media may result in lasting opinions and electoral choices of the viewing and listening audience.
- Ever since the invention of print, caricatures and later photos have been a powerful tool of ridiculing and visual framing. Examples of character attacks by means of caricatures are plenty. An Internet meme spreads rapidly online from person to person via emails, blogs, forums, imageboards, and social media.
- There are three cardinal strategies for mediated campaigns of character assassination. Provocation campaigns create character assassination events in the media or amplify a target’s crisis. Contamination campaigns spread rumors and misinformation through social networks. Finally, obliteration, strategies aim to erase the memory or artifacts related to a public figure.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Have personal attacks against a target ever helped anybody to achieve their goals? Think about your life. Do you personally know anyone who has launched attacks or suffered from an attack on social media? Could you search and find such cases in modern politics?
2. Have you participated in spreading political memes? Why did you do so?
3. Think about your own media consumption habits. Where do you get most of your news?
4. Search for a current new story. How is this story covered by other media sources? Do you notice any examples of framing, priming, or agenda-setting in the news?

KEY TERMS

Agenda-setting The process through which the media prioritize the order of news items and communicate the importance of issues to the public.

Contamination strategies Deliberate dissemination of misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories.

- Deepfake** A technique in which a person in an existing image or video is replaced with someone else's likeness.
- Framing** Highlighting particular aspects of an issue and making connections in ways that allow communicators to promote some issues and moral judgements while downplaying others.
- Obliteration strategies** Purging the memory and public significance of a living or deceased individual.
- Priming** The influence of some preceding information on how the audience reacts to other news.
- Provocation strategies** Strategies that aim to create a highly mediated character assassination event or amplify reputational crisis situations involving the target.
- Reputational risk** The degree of a threat to an individual or organizational reputation.
- Subvertisement** The practice of making parodies of corporate and political advertisements.

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The Impact of Character Attacks

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe different measures of effectiveness of character attacks and the conditions that make character attacks effective.
- Outline the nature of scandals as favorable conditions of character attacks.
- Discuss why some people are more vulnerable to character attacks than other individuals.
- Suggest applications of the study of impacts of character attacks.

The composer Antonio Salieri (1750–1825; see Image 7.1) could not have even thought about becoming one of the most talked about victims of character assassination. He had a dynamic and fruitful musical life. He served as Kapellmeister to the Emperor of Austria. Yet Salieri is probably better known today as a man who had something to do with the death of Wolfgang Mozart (1756–1791), the most celebrated composer of all time. Ask a few educated individuals to quickly tell you what word associations come to their mind first when they hear the name “Salieri.” You will hear most likely, “Mozart” and then “death” or “poisoned” mentioned in the same sentence. Historians almost categorically say that all the allusions are nonsense. All the evidence suggests that Salieri did not kill Mozart (Ross, 2019). Why does Salieri’s name remain on the top of the list of big-time cultural antiheroes?

Salieri’s reputation began to unravel years after Mozart’s premature death. First, malicious gossip about Salieri poisoning Mozart had been circulating among Vienna’s elites. In 1830, the famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) wrote a play, *Mozart and Salieri*, based on the premise of that rumor: Salieri poisoned Mozart, an innocent musical genius. Pushkin took a step further: he described Salieri as an untalented, jealous, and bitter rival of Mozart. Turned into a short opera in the late 19th century, it became a masterpiece, which for decades operagoers appreciated. The most significant blow to Salieri’s reputation took place in 1984, when Miloš Forman directed *Amadeus*, an Oscar-winning global blockbuster. Although the film was about



IMAGE 7.1 Portrait of Antonio Salieri by Joseph Willibrord Mähler (1815)

Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Mozart, it was also bad news for Salieri. He was depicted as a neurotic, obsessive, and moralistic man, angry at his late father, unhappy with his musical mediocrity and pledged celibacy, and extremely envious of Mozart's fame. Salieri, a real person, in fact, in his time was not bitter and pathetic. Neither was he mediocre. He was a successful composer actively and passionately engaged in the musical life of Europe. He wrote some forty operas. He mentored dozens of great composers, including Beethoven and Schubert. Not only did Salieri and Mozart know each other well. They were closely acquainted and cooperated on musical projects. They apparently liked each other.

Musical critics, historians, and psychologists attribute the character-damaging allegations against Salieri to at least three causes (Ross, 2019). The first one refers to Mozart's own psychological propensity for suspiciousness and even mild paranoid assumptions: during his lifetime he imagined multiple plots against him contemplated by his allegedly envious ill-wishers. The second possible cause is connected to the nationalism that was growing in 19th-century Europe. This seemingly unrelated reason should make sense when you realize how important it was at that time for an individual of a high status to be associated with his or her country or nation. Salieri, on the contrary, was cosmopolitan. Born in Italy, he spent most of his life in Austria and France, so that he could not be fully identified in the eyes of the public with either nation. Some people find solace in attacking others who do not strongly associate themselves with their religions or nations. And the third reason is psychological. As we should see later in the book, in the minds of many people, a tragic death of a beloved public figure—especially when the circumstances of the death are unknown—must have something to do with a “villain” or some “bad people” who have been allegedly engaged in a conspiracy behind his back.

Unluckily for Salieri, his public image was vulnerable according to these three criteria. Unintentionally or not, several prominent individuals who wrote about Mozart and speculated about the causes of his death have created a public image that linked Salieri to the alleged crime. As a result, Salieri's reputation has been tarnished in the eyes of many generations.

IMPACT DOMAINS

In this chapter, we will look closer at the outcomes of character attacks. These can be studied in the context of four different domains (or levels): the psychological, the behavioral, the political, and the institutional. Of course, they tend to overlap. Consider the following illustrations of the domains in Table 7.1.

The **institutional** domain includes formal social institutions and the rules that regulate society's functioning, such as laws, or rules that are prescribed or accepted as

TABLE 7.1 The four domains of character attacks' effectiveness

Domain	Description of the impact
Institutional	Changes within formal social institutions and the rules that regulate society's functioning, such as laws.
Political	Political changes, which refer to political power, including interest politics in a great variety of forms.
Behavioral	Identifiable behavioral responses and reactions (immediate or delayed) by the targeted individual as consequences of particular character attacks.
Psychological	Inner changes within the targeted individuals, including their emotions, motivation, or cognitive changes.

binding. Character attacks can be effective if there are no laws to protect the targets of character assassination attempts, so that an attacker can act with impunity. If there are certain legal restrictions, then attacks are likely to be less effective. To illustrate, the spread of cyberbullying, which we have discussed earlier in the book and which very often involves character assassination attempts, caused many countries including the United States and the member states of the European Union to pass or amend their domestic laws—all to reduce the incidents of online harassment or slander. Because such laws do exist, many individuals planning character attacks are likely to think twice before posting something online, since they are aware of the potential legal consequences of their act. In many countries (such as in China, Iran, or Russia, for example) government institutions can set laws to specifically protect political leaders or parties: any online criticism could be immediately qualified as “slander” or “defamation” and thus legal actions are implemented against the alleged “attacker.”

The **political** domain includes character attacks associated with politics and political power. Character attacks can change a public official’s grip on power, affect his or her political campaign, or change a balance of power in a city, state, province, or an entire country. Consider an example. In June 2009, the media announced that South Carolina’s Governor Mark Sanford had . . . disappeared. For six days, his whereabouts were unknown. As it turned out, he was safe. Upon his reappearance, he admitted that he had been in Argentina with a woman, a journalist, with whom he was having an extramarital affair. He apologized. The media in the United States predictably exploded. Sanford was ridiculed, scorned, ostracized, laughed at, and dismissed (Ladner, 2009). To add even more insult to his character, during the days of his absence, his associates kept defending the governor by telling the public that the governor was “hiking the Appalachian Trail.” This term has immediately become a euphemism for the sexual scandal attached to Sanford’s name. As a result of this public humiliation and bipartisan pressure, he resigned in disgrace.

The **behavioral** domain involves character attacks associated with identifiable behavioral responses and reactions (immediate or delayed) by the targeted individual as consequences of particular character attacks. Take, for example, the famous U.S. golfer Tiger Woods’s tearful apology after a violent altercation with his wife and public disclosure of his extramarital affairs (this case is described in detail in Chapter 14). He faced numerous character attacks after the incident. At a 2010 press conference he responded, and his apology was generally accepted by the public. Woods—coached by friends or his lawyers or acting on his own—emphasized at least two things. First, he was deeply sorry for what he had done. Second, he said he was a man of humility and accountability.

The **psychological** domain refers to character attacks affecting inner changes within the targeted individuals, including their emotions, motivation, or cognitive changes. What happens to individuals’ inner worlds, their subjective well-being, after they have experienced a character attack? What is the psychological impact of character attacks on the individual? Such impacts can be: (1) direct and (2) indirect. The **direct impact** of character attacks relates to various psychological outcomes taking place “within” the individual under attack. Such outcomes are supposed to be a direct result of the attack, but they are mediated by situational and individual factors. For example, a university

professor is emotionally traumatized and suffers from elevated anxiety immediately after seeing several insulting and personal remarks on Facebook about her recently published research paper. Or, in a different example, a student refuses to go to school on Monday after a few bullies from her high school relentlessly attacked her on Twitter on Sunday.

The intense impact of personal humiliation is particularly clear in cases of public punishment, which is a feature of many cultures. “Stoning,” “caning,” and “crucifying,” among similar castigations throughout history, allowed public outbursts of anger against the victims, who were usually accused of some crime or moral offense. We have briefly touched on such practices of shaming in Chapter 5, where we categorized them under the type of character attack known as disgracing someone. The psychological impact of this humiliation and profound rejection is likely to be very distressing and traumatic; a person’s public rejection becomes a powerful source for his or her traumatic emotions. In a timeless novel by Leo Tolstoy, its eponymous main character, Anna Karenina, suffered precisely this type of open public rejection by the upper-class elites of 19th-century Russia over allegations about her having an extramarital affair. Today’s politicians face public humiliation when they are attacked in the media and social networks. It is perhaps even more difficult to cope with these attacks (that is, to ignore them) or address them behaviorally when the number of attackers is unknown, their identity is hidden (as in the case of online attacks), and the target is unsure how many people would be willing to defend him or her against these attacks (Icks & Shierae, 2014).

Indirect impact refers to cases where an individual identifies with a target of character assassination or has a special psychological attachment to the cause for which the target stands. In a hypothetical example, a devout Christian can be emotionally hurt (such as feeling angry, helpless, irritated, or agitated) after reading a remark insulting Jesus Christ. He or she can experience an immediate, passing emotional reaction; yet this remark can also cause a long-term discomfort and suffering (a psychological state of distress). The infamous Charlie Hebdo massacre took place after two brothers, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, stormed the offices of the French satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015. Hatred and rage directed against the publication’s editors was—allegedly, because we are not in the position to determine each criminal act’s motivation—a psychological and behavioral reaction to the jokes about Islamic leaders and the prophet Muhammad printed by the publication (Bilefsky, 2015). Many other examples come from social life, entertainment, or politics. Driven by anger or other emotions, some people tend to feel compelled to turn to violence or other destructive action against the perceived source of negative remarks or character attacks. The anonymity of these attacks makes the targets even more vulnerable and often unpredictable in their responses, as they do not know who is behind the attack or how to respond to specific individuals who are thought to be behind the attacks but remain unknown (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2011).

Character attacks can produce results that should often be considered in the context of two or several domains at the same time. An institutional change can be linked to political, behavioral, and psychological impacts—all as a result of character attacks. It makes sense. Imagine, for instance, a dictator whose character is profoundly attacked

online by dissidents opposed to his regime. This may cause the dictator great anxiety (a psychological impact) and may induce him to toughen his stance, cracking down hard on his critics (a behavioral impact). As a result of the attacks against the opposition, he may start to lose support even from his more loyal subjects and allies (a political impact), so that eventually the regime falls and is replaced by another government, which could be free and democratic.

Any character attack involves complex interactions between several actors. In practice, it is very hard to predict with confidence what their impact will be. So far, we have discussed the various domains in which character attacks can have an impact, and the various outcomes which can result from such attacks.

ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CHARACTER ATTACKS

In geological sciences, the strength of an earthquake is measured by its magnitude, or the maximum motion recorded by a seismograph. Based on its magnitude, an earthquake can be minor, moderate, major, etc. The impact of character attacks on the targeted individual also can be placed on a continuum (although science has not come up with a precise scale for such measurements). Borrowing from categories established in modern geology or medicine, we can suggest, just for convenience, that impacts can be placed on a scale ranging from mild to moderate and to profound. The impact can also be “zero.” The distinctions among these points on the scale are difficult to quantify. Establishing exact boundaries between them is next to impossible. For these three categories we use a nominal scale, which is a measurement scale with “tags” or “labels” only, to identify or classify an object. A nominal scale measurement, like in our case, normally describes non-numeric (quantitative) variables that have no value (see Figure 7.1).

Consider two important factors or conditions. The first, which is reflected in the diagram, is the *degree* of damage done to the target’s reputation. The second is the

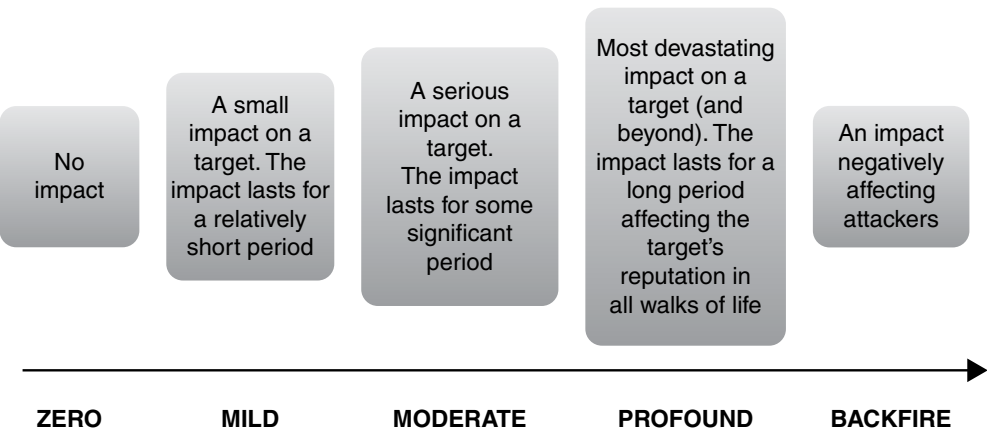


FIGURE 7.1 The scale of effectiveness of character attacks

duration of this damage. While some characters may only be briefly tarnished in public eyes as the result of a character attack, others may suffer public disgrace for a long period. Some people's reputations can remain damaged for centuries after their death. Revisit the case of the composer Salieri, described in the beginning of the chapter. As you can see, a combination of rumors, theatrical plays, and movie scripts have hurt Salieri's reputation for centuries. We will return to these long-lasting consequences of character assassination later in the chapter and in the book. Meanwhile, let's consider the degrees of a person's character damage.

MILD, MODERATE, AND SEVERE CONSEQUENCES

First, impacts of character attacks can be insignificant. The Austrian Emperor Joseph II was portrayed in *Amadeus* (the Oscar-winning film mentioned earlier) as an arrogant, ignorant, and silly lightweight. Yet according to historians he was among the most enlightened monarchs of his time, who disliked pomposity, built government institutions, expanded public education, and promoted the integration of Jews and other minorities into society (Ross, 2019). Obviously, the Hollywood portrayal of the emperor in *Amadeus* was unflattering. Yet today, besides a few historians, not many people will be concerned much about the inaccurate image conveyed in the Hollywood blockbuster. On the contrary, many people tend to uncritically believe in what they hear or see on the screen.

When character attacks have a moderate impact, they will noticeably affect the target's reputation for a considerable period, but still only sway part of the audience, or only sway them to some extent. In time, the negative effects may fade away. Many of the character attacks launched against political candidates during election campaigns fall into this category: they tarnish the reputation of the candidate in the eyes of some voters but are not "killer blows" that knock them out of the race completely. The example of Governor Sanford earlier in this chapter shows that despite an avalanche of character damaging news reports and opinion editorials, he weathered the media storm and ran for United States Congress one year after the scandal that toppled his governorship. Although his reputation was somewhat damaged, he managed to become a Congressman.

The severe impact can be equated to character assassination, or a profound, essentially irreversible demise of a person's reputation. Biographers of Mohamed Reza Pahlavi (1919–1980; see Image 7.2), former Shah of Iran, documented numerous and relentless character attacks against him during his tenure as head of state. He was accused by his domestic critics of philandering, greed, nepotism, and addiction to gambling. He was described as a weak and vacillating man. Such attacks (whether based on factual evidence or not) reportedly had a serious psychological impact on the Shah and even influenced his political decisions: he became increasingly impulsive and could be indecisive at times. It is probable that impulsivity and indecisiveness had been traits of the Shah's personality since his youth. He was seriously ill by the end of his reign, and the attacks, most likely, aggravated his psychological weaknesses, according to prominent biographers (Milani, 2011). What is important in this case is that his reputation



IMAGE 7.2 Official portrait of Shah Mohamed Reza Pahlavi of Iran, who suffered serious psychological damage from character attacks

Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

has fallen to very low levels across the entire Iranian society. In short, the impact of the attacks was not limited to the Shah's reputation, but seriously affected his mental state and behavior as well.

Can character attacks fail? Indeed, they can flop. U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton's character was under assault frequently and on many subjects. One kind of the attacks focused on her alleged lesbian identity and her, also alleged, sexual affairs. Online allegations about her affairs emerged in 2015 and 2016, when she was running for president. Although many rumors have followed Clinton for decades, they intensified during the most important and dramatic year of her political career. Clinton's active campaigning for marriage equality, her numerous and passionate statements about gay rights, and, in particular, her long-time close professional association with an aide

named Huma Abedin (b. 1976), a wife at that time of a U.S. Congressman—all sparked relentless rumors, most likely sparked by her opponents, about Clinton’s sexual orientation (Suebsaeng, 2016).

Yet all these rumors about Clinton were baseless; several media personalities and websites had to issue formal apologies for spreading fake stories. Most importantly, the general public was not particularly interested in the rumors. In the second decade of this century, according to polls, a sizable majority of Americans (more than 70 percent) would not view same-sex relations negatively—a substantial shift in opinions since 2000, when the majority had a negative view (McCarthy, 2017). All in all, the numerous attacks on Clinton failed to produce a public scandal and apparently caused no additional damage to her reputation because of the unreliable sources of the rumors and the public’s lack of interest in the subject (Kale, 2016). Moreover, there were more serious accusations against Clinton thrown at her from every direction during her campaign, portraying her as an incompetent and lying politician—attacks that had caused more serious political fallout than the false rumors about her sexual orientation. Clinton was not elected president.

WHEN CHARACTER ATTACKS BACKFIRE

Character attacks can backfire and cause an effect opposite to the attacker’s goals. Let’s consider an example from Canada. How does a political party blow up its own campaign? The Progressive Conservatives (called Tories) were not doing well in the run-up to the 1993 federal election, suffering from declining support and lagging behind their Liberal Party competitors. In an effort to turn things around, they aired a number of television ads attacking the Liberal leader, Jean Chrétien. The ads criticized Chrétien’s performance as a cabinet minister in several Liberal governments of the previous decades. They showed pictures drawing attention to the man’s facial deformity, caused by a paralysis of the muscles on the left-hand side of his face. “Jean Chrétien—a Prime Minister?” a critical voice-over wondered. “I personally would be very embarrassed if he were to become the Prime Minister of Canada,” another voice-over commented.

The backlash was swift and brutal. On the evening the ads first aired, a TV news commentator condemned them as inappropriate, suggesting that they were making fun of Chrétien’s physical disability. The next morning, Chrétien gave a public response. He reminisced about being bullied for his facial deformity as a child and remarked that he had long ago come to accept the way God had created him. This elicited enormous sympathy from Canadian voters. At another public appearance, Chrétien admitted that it was true that he only spoke on one part of his mouth but added that at least he was no Tory speaking on both sides. The Progressive Conservatives realized they were coming across as bullies and pulled the attack ads within 24 hours after their initial release, but the damage had already been done. Their support plummeted even further. In the end, they only gained 16 percent of the vote and lost 167 of their 169 seats in parliament! Chrétien won the election and became prime minister. It is for good reason, then, that the decision to run these ads has been described as “the single greatest blunder in the use of advertising in Canadian elections” (Gosselin & Soderlund, 1999, p. 35). We discuss how character attacks backfire in other places in this book.

CHARACTER ATTACKS AND PUBLIC SCANDALS

Character attackers need a perceiving audience, i.e. the individuals and groups who ultimately witness, judge, and then respond to these attacks. When character attacks are successful, from the standpoint of an attacker or a perceptive audience, they tend to result in scandal, turning the person who was the target of the attacks into an emblem of shame and disgrace. In their severest form, they can completely destroy the target's reputation. To understand why some character attacks can lead to public scandals and result in character assassination but others do not, one should pay attention to the key contextual elements of the process leading to a scandal. The first is the quality and quantity of the attacks. The other is the social environment or culture in which they occur (Icks & Shiraev, 2019).

Earlier in this chapter, we distinguished between the *degree* and the *duration* of the effects of character attacks. As we noted, sometimes these effects can endure much longer than the target's lifetime. In those cases, the target goes down in history with a bad reputation. We have already come across several other examples of such historical character assassinations in this book. Think, for instance, of the sun-worshipping Pharaoh Akhenaten whose legacy was rejected by his successors, resulting in the destruction of his images and his removal from the official list of kings. The notorious English King Richard III is another illustration. At the start of this chapter, we encountered the composer Salieri, who gained an entirely unjustified reputation in history as the jealous rival who killed Mozart.

Why did the character assassinations of these individuals have such an historical impact? Sheer chance may be part of the answer. Richard III would probably not be so notorious today if the literary giant Shakespeare had not cast him as a villain in one of his plays. Still, why did Shakespeare pick this particular king more than a century after his death? Obviously, there must be more to it. A deeper answer would be to say that historical character assassinations may last as long as the target holds relevance to later generations or to other cultures. To understand what this means, let's consider another example: the Spanish nobleman Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, the third Duke of Alba—also known as the Iron Duke (1507–1582). This is a man that has a very profound impact on the collective memory of Dutch people. Alba served as one of the most trusted advisers and generals to the Spanish King Philip II, one of the most powerful monarchs of the 16th century, when Spain was in its heyday. Philip controlled vast territories across the globe, including lands in Europe and the Americas. Among his possessions were the Low Countries, a small but prosperous region roughly corresponding to the modern-day Netherlands and Belgium. In 1568, the Low Countries revolted against Spanish rule. The Dutch and Flemish people living there felt they were overtaxed and religiously oppressed (many of them had converted to Protestantism, while Spain was staunchly Catholic). Philip sent in his able general Alba to bring the rebels to heel (Darby, 2001; Kamen, 2004; van Gelderen, 1993).

It was the start of a long and bloody conflict that has become known as the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648). Alba did not shy away from harsh measures to quench the revolt. He instituted the Council of Troubles, a special court set up to deal with those who had defied their sovereign and betrayed their faith. To the Dutch, it soon became

known as the Council of Blood. Many citizens were condemned to death and executed; many more lost all their possessions. Towns were besieged, the countryside ravished. But the war was also waged with words and images. The Dutch printed numerous pamphlets denouncing Alba as a cruel and bloodthirsty oppressor. He was compared



IMAGE 7.3 The tyrannical Duke of Alba is devouring children in this 1572 piece of Dutch propaganda

Source: Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Public Domain

to tyrannical figures from the Bible, such as Pharaoh and King Herod. Pictures showed the Duke seated on a throne, with the seventeen Dutch and Flemish provinces kneeling before him in chains. One pamphlet turned him into a cannibalistic monster feasting on the flesh of an infant, with the decapitated bodies of two Dutch noblemen lying at his feet (Tanis & Horst, 1993; see Image 7.3).

Ultimately, the Dutch (but not the Flemish) managed to wrest themselves free from Spanish rule and founded an independent nation, the Dutch Republic. In the current-day Netherlands, the struggle against Spain some four hundred years ago still serves as the country's founding myth or historical anchor that defines Dutch identity. It will come as no surprise that the Duke of Alba fulfills the role of villain in this story. Much more so than the distant King Philip II, he is regarded as the face of the oppressing regime which the Dutch shook off to gain their independence. For this reason, Alba's terrible reputation endures even more than four centuries later. To be sure, modern historians treat him with much more nuance than the 16th-century pamphleteers, drawing attention to his loyalty and qualities as a military commander. But to the average Dutchman or woman, it is probably fair to say that Alba is still seen as something of a national bogeyman.

What is true for Alba is true for many historical figures who have gained notoriety, from "mad" Roman emperors like Caligula and Nero to King Richard III and Queen "Bloody" Mary. These men and women have been woven into larger narratives about national, ethnic, or religious identities. Often, they serve as icons of immorality, tyranny, and oppression. Because they represent the "bad," we, as history observers, can distance ourselves from them and side with the "good." In the process, their three-dimensionality as people of flesh and blood, with their positive and negative characteristics, hopes and dreams, vanishes. All we are left with is "flat" villains, the bad boys and wicked women of history.

SUSCEPTIBILITY TO CHARACTER ATTACKS

Chapter 4 explains why some people appear less susceptible to character attacks than others. In that chapter we learned about those political and social aspects that can explain why some individuals in certain circumstances become more vulnerable to character attacks, compared to other people.

Character assassination vulnerability indicates an individual's degree of susceptibility to character attacks. Such vulnerability can be measured from an (1) individual and (2) social, or cultural, dimension. A damaging article posted on a site or an insulting picture uploaded to a social network produces different impacts under different social and individual circumstances. Facing character attacks, some individuals seek and find inner emotional and cognitive resources to activate protective psychological mechanisms. Others are at a loss and suffer emotionally from the attacks (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Why do some people develop such protective barriers or shields while others do not?

From the individual dimension, there are people who—due to their individual traits or personal life circumstances—become vulnerable to character attacks. Here we are

turning to the concept of individual threshold in our analysis of character assassination. The term “threshold” in psychological studies refers to sensory processes, such as vision or hearing. A sensory threshold in psychology refers to the minimum amount of signal necessary to produce a sensation. In the context of character attacks, the **individual threshold** is a person’s measure of susceptibility or vulnerability to character attacks. Individual threshold means that certain individuals have developed relatively high or low immunity to (or feel relatively unaffected by) character attacks (Icks & Shiraev, 2019). People with low thresholds are more vulnerable; they tend to be more sensitive to any information that attempts to discredit, criticize, or convey a negative public view of them.

Psychological science suggests that some people have stable individual features or traits called *neuroticism*: persistent vigilance and caution in most life situations. These individuals tend to see threats in circumstances and signals that other people easily ignore. As such, a simple act of criticism can provoke a strong emotional reaction in them. Psychologists also suggest that some people can develop a set of self-diminishing beliefs and self-critical assumptions that make them more vulnerable to attacks compared to other individuals. At the other end of the spectrum there are individuals who measure low on neuroticism, tend to respond less to threatening signals, and pay less attention to character attacks.

People could also become vulnerable to character attacks because of their social background and behavior. We expect individuals who tend to engage in lying, cheating, violence, or scandalous behavior to become vulnerable to character attacks because of their known or even assumed anti-social actions. In fact, it is easier to find compromising facts about a person’s character if she is known to have engaged in theft, substance abuse, cheating, domestic violence, or even traffic violations in the past.

Yet individual traits and personal life circumstances are not the only factors determining character assassination vulnerability. There are also social conditions conducive to character assassination. For example, slander tends to be most effective in a cultural climate filled with anxiety. During the French Revolution in the late 1700s, the hot-tempered political climate of the time, combined with the general public’s deep distrust of politicians, turned character attacks into a preferred tool for getting rid of political rivals and generating new attacks. Even individuals against whom there was little actual evidence of misconduct were frequently misquoted, slandered, condemned, and then executed. This is an example of a culture of character assassination gone haywire (Harder, 2014).

Traditional cultures, conservative and intolerant to innovations, tend to be confined within local and regional boundaries (we turn to cultural contexts of character assassination in Chapter 9). Non-traditional cultures, by contrast, tend to be absorbent and dynamic. That is, whereas traditional cultures embrace only a certain set of ideas associated with a particular religious doctrine, tribe, ethnic group, or territory as part of their reality, the image of reality in contemporary non-traditional cultures is constantly expanding. Traditional cultures have a wide variety of characteristics: for example, a combination of high individual scores in filial piety (virtue of respect for one’s parents or elders), conformity, emotional self-control, and humility (Park & Kim, 2008). They also strictly define “good” and “bad” character traits. Thus, individuals living in these environments are relatively easy targets of character attacks: any deviation from

the cultural standard can be considered a personal vulnerability. In the Communist Soviet Union and China, especially in the 1950s and 60s, there were official written codes of moral behavior (such as be honest, be humble, do not lie, work hard, etc.), by which each individual’s actions could be measured and then judged by officials (Shiraev & Yang, 2014).

LET’S DISCUSS: ARE THERE TEFLON CHARACTERS?

In Chapter 4 we discussed the phenomenon of *Teflon* politicians who seem to have an easy time avoiding blame or scandal. Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) was often called the *Teflon President*, because character attacks against him in the media never seemed to affect his ratings and his self-esteem. As experts wrote, his personal charm and behavioral posture could have become protective layers that generally spared his reputation from attacks and criticisms. Other suggest that there were important historic and political circumstances, such as the disunity of the Democratic Party, the necessity to have a strong leader vis-à-vis the Cold War opponents, the booming economy—that allowed Reagan to successfully rebuff most character attacks during his tenure (Lanoue, 1989). Presidents Clinton and Trump also managed to dodge many character attacks against them. What other individuals in history could have been associated with the *Teflon* label? Consider the following suggestions (see Table 7.2). What specific individual traits, from your point of view, do *Teflon* individuals (you may know some of them from your own experience) need to have to display such a propensity to rebuff character attacks?

TABLE 7.2 On “Teflon” characters

Name	Perceived personal traits	Favorable circumstances
Ronald Reagan, U.S. President	Great acting skills Great oratory skills Personal charm	The ongoing Cold War Healthy economy Weak and disunited political opposition
Bill Clinton, U.S. President	Great communication skills Personal charm The ability to “connect” with the voter	Healthy economy Backfired attacks of his political opponents Relative global stability
Vladimir Putin, Russian President	Assertiveness Toughness Reliability	Social stability Seemingly assertive international behavior Censorship of character attackers

Yet there are individuals who withstand attacks and seem to come out from the “media fire” almost unharmed in terms of their reputation or career. Donald Trump, for instance, has long been known for his provocative, fiery, bombastic—and as his critics say—irresponsible public comments and statements. Not surprisingly, he was relentlessly and personally attacked for his incivility and boorishness during the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns. As you can see, under certain conditions, some individuals develop **character assassination immunity**—the individual’s ability to withstand character attacks due to their personality traits or a favorable social and political environment around them. In other words, specific individual traits and conditions allow some individuals to develop strong barriers or psychological defenses against character attacks. In the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s, for example, getting divorced meant that an individual was highly unlikely to retain a position of power in the government, including universities (the logic was that if one could not “manage” his family, one could not manage an institution). Cultural and political conditions in Russia, as well as moral prescriptions, began to change in the 1990s. Expectedly, President Vladimir Putin’s reputation as Russia’s leader had not suffered since his 2013 divorce, according to opinion polls (Shiraev, 2021). So does the “immunity” in this case really have to do with Putin’s personal traits, or is it just a matter of shifting social perceptions and cultural norms, as with Hillary Clinton and the lesbian accusations? Most likely, both factors played a role.

Character attacks produce different results. As we have already learned from many cases, some attacks can be inconsequential. They do not last. Their impact is insignificant. Other attacks produce immediate and very painful costs for the targets. Yet others, like we have seen in the Salieri case in this chapter, can produce a long-lasting impact. In this chapter we have learned about why some attacks can be effective, while others tend to sputter out without doing any damage. Some others backfire and hurt the attacker. In the next chapter, we will discuss the defenses against character attacks.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Character attacks produce different results. As we have already learned from many cases, some attacks can be insignificant and short-term. Other attacks produce immediate and very painful consequences. Yet others can produce a long-lasting impact.
- Character attacks’ effectiveness should be considered within at least four domains. The institutional domain includes formal social institutions and the rules that regulate society’s functioning, such as laws of power or formal institutional rules and laws. The political domain includes character attacks that are associated with or cause political changes, which refer to political power, including interest politics in a great variety of forms. The behavioral domain involves character attacks associated with identifiable behavioral responses and reactions (immediate or delayed) by the targeted individual as consequences of particular character attacks. The psychological domain refers to character attacks affecting inner changes within the targeted individuals, including their emotions, motivation, or cognitive changes.

- The impact of character attacks on the targeted individual can be placed on a continuum or on a scale ranging from mild to moderate and to profound. The impact can also be relatively short- or long term. Impacts of character attacks can be insignificant. When character attacks have a moderate impact, they will noticeably affect the target's reputation for a considerable period, but still only sway part of the audience, or only sway them to some extent. The severe impact can be equated to character assassination, or a profound, essentially irreversible demise of a person's reputation.
- Character attacks can fail (bring negligible results) or backfire (bring results opposite to what was intended). Character attacks become especially effective if they are associated with or cause social scandals.
- People can have different susceptibility levels or thresholds to character attacks. Some of them can be very vulnerable due to their individual traits or social circumstances surrounding them. Others are less vulnerable or develop protective features labeled as character assassination immunity.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Describe the four domains of character attacks. Provide your own examples of each domain. In which ways can these domains overlap? Give your suggestions.
2. Think and provide an example (one hypothetical and the other one from history or politics) suggesting a character attack that backfired.
3. Explain what a public scandal is. Give an example of a scandal from modern politics or from history. Does your case involve character attacks? If so, what kind? Use the features of a scandal described in the chapter to describe a scandal of your choice.
4. Explain character assassination vulnerability. Choose any individual (preferably an aspiring politician) from modern politics and try to list her or his vulnerabilities, such as traits or circumstances. What potential issues could inspire future character attacks?
5. Who can be called a person with a Teflon character? Can you come up with your own examples from history or contemporary politics?

KEY TERMS

Behavioral domain The domain that involves character attacks associated with identifiable behavioral responses and reactions (immediate or delayed) by the targeted individual as consequences of particular character attacks.

Character assassination immunity An individual's ability to withstand character attacks due to their personality traits or a favorable social and political environment around them.

Character assassination vulnerability An individual's degree of susceptibility to character attacks.

- Direct impact** The various psychological outcomes taking place “within” the individual under attack.
- Indirect impact** The outcomes in which an individual identifies with a target of character assassination or has a psychological attachment to the cause for which the target stands and is therefore affected when the target is attacked.
- Individual threshold** A person’s measure of susceptibility or vulnerability to character attacks.
- Institutional domain** The domain that includes formal social institutions and the rules that regulate society’s functioning, such as laws.
- Political domain** The domain that includes character attacks associated with politics and political power.
- Psychological domain** The domain that refers to character attacks affecting inner changes within the targeted individuals, including their emotions, motivation, or cognitive changes.

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Defending Against and Managing Character Attacks

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe the core ideas of reputation management.
- Critically discuss the notion of a reputational crisis.
- Explain opportunities and challenges related to the three stages of reputation management.
- Discuss recommendations about defending against character attacks and managing them.

In 1888, a French newspaper published an obituary headlined, “The merchant of death is dead.” It stated, “Dr. Alfred Nobel, who made his fortune by finding a way to kill more people as ever before in the shortest time possible, died yesterday.” The newspaper mistakenly took the death of Nobel’s brother Ludvig for Alfred’s passing. The inventor of dynamite, Alfred Nobel (1833–1896; see Image 8.1), was a Swedish chemist and businessman who devoted his early years to the study of how to control and use nitroglycerine as a commercial explosive. Nobel was a pacifist. But this did not prevent him from owning the Swedish arms manufacturer Bofors, which held 355 patents and established more than 90 armament factories. When he read the obituary, he was horrified at the idea that he would be remembered as “the merchant of death.” Soon after, he decided to change his will and posthumously donated the majority of his wealth to a series of prizes for peace, literature, and the sciences that now bear his name. The Nobel Prize was created at least in part out of his desire to have a better reputation and legacy. Alfred Nobel’s decision was strategic and preventive. We can assume that he intended to defend his reputation against immediate as well as posthumous attacks (Fant, 1993).

The case of Alfred Nobel also demonstrates that society requires its members, especially public figures, to sustain an appropriate public image in compliance with social values and rules of conduct. In response, to appear legitimate and “good,” people try to exercise appropriate behavior, however it is defined within historical and cultural



IMAGE 8.1 Alfred Nobel created the Nobel Prize at least in part to defend his own reputation long term

Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

contexts. The outcome of these efforts is the individual's reputation, which we defined in Chapter 1. Reputation appears as a complex "sum of the images" that various audiences in different situations hold of a person (Fombrun, 1996). Character attacks, of course, tend to affect these images.

We should acknowledge from the start that neither researchers nor practitioners working in the fields of reputation management have a universal recipe or a magic formula to best manage reputations and protect individuals against character attacks. Yet, there are known factors that determine the effectiveness of reputation management strategies. We will discuss them in this chapter. We also focus on the prevention of reputational crises when character attacks become relentless and seemingly effective. Most

reputation management research comes from public relations and crisis communication. However, we also rely on research into psychology and history. In addition, case studies from different arenas of life provide valuable material to study characterization and defenses against attacks.

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Reputation is essentially linked to the concept of **trust**, the condition of an individual's confidence in another person's actions. People trust one another if they have positive reputations and thus appear legitimate as judged by others. Reputation is based on positive or negative perceptions and evaluations from other people. For instance, if you hear people saying, "I was told that you are unapproachable, but in fact I had a great experience talking to you," will you be surprised or not about being unapproachable? Of course, it all depends on what you think of yourself and how you want to appear to others. It also depends on the situation.

At least two types of reputation exist: *positive reputation* (a measure of how others like you) and *negative reputation* (a measure of how others dislike you). These two types are not mutually exclusive—it is possible to be both much liked and much disliked by different groups at the same time (Sandman, 2010). Think, for instance, of Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden or Bernie Sanders who had avid fans as well as fierce critics when they were running for the White House and working there!

There are at least two popular perspectives of how positive and negative reputations are created (Coombs, 2019; Sandman, 2010). The first is the **bank account hypothesis**. It states that events that damage an individual's reputation happen as if they were bank withdrawals. Events that improve an individual's reputation can be compared to deposits. Therefore, reputation management helps a person build a healthy balance of "reputational capital." A person with bountiful reputational capital can afford to spend or lose some capital and still maintain a favorable reputation (Alsop, 2004). On the other hand, individuals with a bad reputation could restore a fine, positive public image by engaging in socially desirable, moral acts including public apology. Many sports teams have so-called "bad apple" athletes known for their over-the-top and often inappropriate social behavior. Yet, their professional accomplishments on the tennis court or on the soccer pitch give them a reputational safety "cushion." Think about the legendary Diego Maradona (1960–2020), an Argentine soccer superstar, whose exceptional athletic skills and most prestigious trophies helped him maintain a hero status among tens of millions of his fans for years, despite constant media reports about his continuous problems with alcohol later in his career.

The second, competing view, is the **halo effect hypothesis**. Like a well-managed bank account, good reputation supplies a buffer or a shield against character attacks. Likewise, a very bad reputation makes a person especially vulnerable to character attacks. This happens because people tend to maintain a biased view of the world. According to a cognitive balance view in social psychology, which is at the root of the halo effect hypothesis, human beings tend to "balance" their views about other people or things by holding onto a biased view: a good person is not supposed to do

bad things—only a bad person does bad things (Festinger, 1957). Following this logic, public opinion can turn for or against a person and determine who is “good” or “bad” very quickly—all based on this biased view. Lance Armstrong (b. 1971) was for some time one of the most famous bicyclists in the world. Winner of many prestigious tournaments, a cancer survivor, and a global celebrity, he was engaged in many successful charitable projects. However, after he revealed in 2013 that he had used illegal performance-enhancing drugs, Armstrong’s reputation took a major dive—the facts of cheating were enough to overshadow his charitable work. He has practically disappeared from the media. You can ask a question: can a cheater still do good charitable work? They may, but the public, according to the halo effect hypothesis, is likely to maintain a negative view of the cheater.

Both the bank account and halo effect hypotheses seem plausible, yet they need further testing in the context of character assassination. For example, how much good reputation should a person accumulate to be immune to character attacks? And how bad must one’s reputation be to become vulnerable to character attacks? We will get back to these questions and answers when we turn to public scandals in Chapter 9.

REPUTATIONAL CRISIS

When people fail to properly address character attacks, they often encounter a **reputational crisis**—a negative event that is judged by the perceptions of multiple audiences, can affect public opinion, and seriously damage reputation beyond the point of no return. After years in the public eye on one of the oldest and most successful late-night comedy shows *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), the popular comedian Al Franken (b. 1951; see Image 8.2) remade himself into a successful, high-profile politician and a member of the U.S. Senate. (You can only imagine how many attacks on his reputation he witnessed from his opponents for the fact that he used to be a comedian.) He served on several committees, including the Judiciary, championed women’s causes and criticized Donald Trump’s administration. In November 2017, Leeann Tweeden, a talk-radio host, alleged in an interview that Franken forcibly kissed her in 2006 during a rehearsal for a skit. Franken was also photographed appearing to place his hands above Tweeden’s breasts while she was asleep on a military plane wearing body armor and a helmet. The story appeared in the media in the aftermath of the film producer Harvey Weinstein’s huge sexual scandal.

Franken apparently quickly understood the stakes and issued an apology, which Tweeden accepted. Yet journalists and politicians immediately reacted to Tweeden’s release of the photo (Mayer, 2019). Michelle Goldberg of *The New York Times* wrote that it was “utterly dehumanizing,” and called for Franken’s immediate resignation. Seth Meyers, talk-show host and SNL alum said it was “horrifying” (Rosen, 2017). Al Franken’s character was under a severe attack, and he ultimately resigned because his actions caused a fast-developing public scandal. (Scandals will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.) Some scholars call such scandals a **fiasco vortex**, which refers to “a runaway crisis of snowball effects that magnify destructive information and



IMAGE 8.2 Former Senator Al Franken found himself in a fiasco vortex after accusations of sexual harassment emerged in 2017

Source: Photo by Laurie Shauli, CC BY-SA 4.0

spread beyond the reach of available treatments” (Dezenhall, as cited in Icks, Keohane, Samoilenko, & Shiraev, 2017, p. 4). It looks today that there was nothing Franken could have done to prevent the fiasco vortex from occurring. No apology could have helped him because apologies only tend to work when many in the audience actually want to hear them (Dezenhall, personal communication, August 2020).

There are two characteristics of a reputational crisis after an event takes place and the information about this event became public. First, the media and key audiences demand an immediate response from those who seem to be responsible for the problem. This is critical because crises cause a great deal of time pressure and uncertainty (Coombs, 2019). Second, the stakes for reputational survival for public figures become much higher than under normal circumstances (Dezenhall, 2014). Today, the speed with which information can be shared, the volume of that information, and the motivations behind personal allegations have made reputational attacks more powerful compared to decades ago.

Reputational crises often involve attackers who seek to create negative publicity in the form of clickbait. For example, reporters in pursuit of high ratings can expose an individual’s misdeeds, instigate lawsuits, find facts or even alleged facts, and prompt activists to launch boycotts or protests against the target. The goal is to make this event resonate with multiple audiences and communities, declare the target morally wrong, and stimulate public outrage demanding immediate resolution. The case of Al Franken is a vivid illustration. Whether a targeted person is right or wrong is a matter of legal judgement and, of course, historical and cultural perspectives.

It would be naïve to expect people to ignore the importance of their public images. Most people use common sense or advice from their friends and relatives to make sure that their reputation is safeguarded. For many public figures such safeguarding requires professional help. In the context of character assassination, **public relations (PR)** is the professional maintenance of a favorable image of a public figure. PR as a process refers to politicians, celebrities, corporate CEOs, and companies attempting to foster good relationships with key audiences and stakeholders which are important to their success. In the political field, PR practitioners and consultants help politicians develop strategies to win voter support. Similarly, in the business sector, they help corporate CEOs maintain positive public perceptions of their leadership via corporate citizenship programs (Stangis, 2017). Many PR practitioners specialize in a specific area, such as risk assessment and crisis communication. The latter play a critical role in maintaining relations with the public. PR practitioners also help organizations and their leaders cultivate a desired image and manage public impressions.

Now that we have identified the concept of reputation and crisis, let's look at the three stages of reputation management: preparedness and prevention, image repair, and post-crisis communication.

STAGE ONE: CRISIS PREPAREDNESS AND PREVENTION

The best thing to do about a damaged reputation is to make sure it does not get damaged in the first place. That is why preparedness and prevention measures are so important. They seek to identify issues, reduce risks, and prepare response strategies against reputational crises. There are multiple factors that determine how effective such measures are. Crisis managers develop methods for detecting warning signs, assessing threats to reputation, and then responding (or not) to them. We can identify three critical components: issues management, risk management, and inoculation strategies.

Issues management (IM) is a proactive attempt to identify and resolve high-priority issues that could or do present challenges to an individual or an organization. For instance, it may emerge from a screening that a new candidate for an office had ties with a violent protest movement in the past. Will this fact become an issue? Traditionally, the ultimate objective of an IM process is to find and execute the right strategy that will move a certain problem or an issue from a state of reputation risk to a managed state (Botan, 2018). What particular fact about a person becomes an “issue” that can be used in character attacks?

As we discussed in earlier chapters, we need to look into specific social, cultural, or political contexts within which a threat to a person's reputation appears. An issue for a public at one point in time may not be an issue for that same public later—or vice versa. For example, smoking cigarettes in the office, wearing fur on the street, or corporal punishment of children were for a long time seen as non-issues, but these days they could damage a person's good standing. There are more serious reputational issues, of course. Increasingly since the 1980s, in most liberal democratic countries, public opinion turned to the problem of sexual harassment. These changes have not only prompted the adoption of harassment policies at the workplace but transformed

most people's awareness about this important issue. Individuals can also face legitimate criticisms and character attacks for their past problems such as plagiarism in college, an arrest for drunk driving, or a disorderly conduct. Other issues can be exaggerated or even made up and then used against an individual, especially if they are celebrities or political candidates. Politicians and political candidates therefore tend to have prep teams exploring potential issues that can cause character attacks against their candidate and rehearsing how to address such potential attacks (Palmieri, 2019). Sometimes preventive actions are required.

One such preventive strategy is called **stealing thunder**. It is about releasing information about a person's issue or a potential crisis before it becomes known to many people. In media environments, stealing thunder can reduce critical news coverage overall and increase the flow of positive stories (Wigley, 2011). This strategy may or may not work. As we discussed earlier in the chapter, the famous cyclist Lance Armstrong (see Image 8.3) admitted on a TV talk show that he had used banned performance enhancing drugs. If the stealing thunder strategy was efficient, his confession should have reduced the reputational damage. It did not. The fact that Armstrong lied for years about not using illegal substances caused his rapid demise as a public figure (Stowe, 2016).

Another method is **counter-imaging**, which provides the audience with a positive frame to counter an image delivered in character attacks (Craig, Rippere, & Grayson, 2014). Counter-imaging is about questioning character attacks and their credibility—but only by implication, not by criticizing the attacker directly. A fine example of this method can be taken from the 2008 Democratic presidential primary in the United



IMAGE 8.3 The fact that cyclist Lance Armstrong lied for years about his illegal substance use meant he could not weather the reputational crisis when the truth came out

Source: Creative Commons license: CC BY-SA 1.0

States, when Hillary Clinton aired the dramatic, “It’s 3 a.m. and something’s happening in the world” spot that emphasized (without mentioning the name of Barack Obama) her opponent’s lack of foreign policy experience. The Obama campaign responded with a spot that closely resembled Clinton’s, but conveyed a positive message, suggesting that the best person to be answering an alarming phone call at 3 a.m. was the one who had taken the “correct” positions on Iraq, al-Qaeda, and nuclear disarmament—which was, according to the video, Senator Obama.

Issues management is associated with **risk management**, which involves helping individuals and organizations reduce the probability of a reputational crisis. Such a crisis usually occurs when negative public outrage escalates (Sandman, 1993). Like issues management, risk management involves a systematic search for warning signs and threats to individual and organizational reputation to prognosticate the likelihood of a developing crisis (Coombs, 2019). The basis for risk management is **risk assessment**, which is built around two factors: likelihood and impact. Likelihood is the probability that a threat will become a crisis. Impact is the degree of damage a crisis can inflict. Typically, each threat is given a score from 1 to 10 for likelihood and impact with 1 being low and 10 high. The crisis manager then multiplies the likelihood and impact ratings to establish a final crisis vulnerability score. The higher the score, the greater the potential damage (Barton, 2001; Fink, 1986). For example, finding out that a candidate for a public office smoked marijuana during her college years is very likely to receive extremely low scores on both scales in today’s social climate in the United States. However, accusations about being romantically involved with a foreign national, a suspected spy, can be scored high and thus cause serious damage to the reputation of a congressman serving on the House Intelligence Committee, as happened to California Congressman Eric Swalwell in 2020.

Social media provide opportunities for finding warning signs generated by key audiences. Crisis managers reach out to media experts to gain insights into public online conversations to learn more about people’s attitudes. Search streams in the Hootsuite dashboard allow crisis managers to monitor conversations based on keywords, hashtags, locations, and even specific users. Talkwalker uses more than 50 filters to monitor conversations across 150 million data sources. Reddit Keyword Monitor Pro also allows specialists to monitor the site for relevant keywords and phrases.

An alternative strategy has been developed in social sciences. **Inoculation theory** suggests that resistance to persuasion can be induced much like resistance to viruses. If a member of the public is exposed to a weakened dose of unpleasant or damaging information, they tend to become inoculated and generate protective responses (Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964). During the 1991–1992 U.S. presidential primaries, Gennifer Flowers scheduled a press conference on Monday afternoon to declare her adulterous relationship with candidate Bill Clinton (Booth-Butterfield, 2009). The Clinton campaign, in a quick response, arranged an appearance for Bill and Hillary Clinton on a Sunday episode of the popular TV news program, *60 Minutes*. In that episode, the Clintons acknowledged past marital problems (who does not have them?) and insisted that these problems were behind them. As you can see, the Clintons produced an “immunization” for or against negative public judgments about marriage, fidelity, privacy, and politics—all prior to the “real” attack from Gennifer Flowers. By the next day, Flowers’ press

conference appeared to many as “old news.” Many people even discounted her claims as an attempt to gain publicity.

Effective crisis managers identify threats and then try to inoculate their target audiences against such threats. There are three steps of inoculation: warning, weak attack, and active defense (Booth-Butterfield, 2009; Compton, 2013, 2020). A conventional inoculation message begins with a forewarning of impending challenges to an attitude, then advances and refutes some possible attacks that might be raised by opponents. Such a warning activates cognitive mechanisms in the audience about a forthcoming character attack. When people actively think about somebody trying to persuade them, they tend to develop considerably stronger attitudes and beliefs resisting persuasion. Refutational preemption provides the weak version of a threat. The attack has to be strong enough to challenge the defenses of the receiver without overwhelming them. If the attack is too strong, it will produce the opposite effect and make the attitudes or beliefs weaker.

STAGE TWO: RESPONDING TO A CRISIS

When a reputational crisis occurs, sustaining positive reputation becomes a long-term goal. The immediate goal is conflict resolution and public outrage management. In this section we look at two theories on crisis response and their applications: image repair theory and situational crisis communication theory.

Most scholarship on defense against character assassination in crisis situations is loosely based on the concept of account-giving (Benoit, 1995). Accounts are statements people use to explain their actions when their behavior is called into question. Scott and Lyman (1968) proposed two forms of account-giving: *excuses* and *justifications*. **Excuses** acknowledge a failure but deny responsibility and generally blame the situation itself or another person instead. Excuses citing causes that are unintentional, uncontrollable, and external are more effective than excuses citing intentional, controllable, and internal causes. Toronto Mayor Rob Ford tried in 2013 to save his political career by offering an excuse for his use of crack cocaine: it was his excessive drinking problem. Congressman Anthony Weiner in 2011 excused his online sexting by the fact that his phone was hacked. In both cases these officials eventually resigned under public pressure and persistent character attacks.

Justifications acknowledge a problem or a failure to take some responsibility but claim that the actions of the accused were not harmful or perhaps resulted in positive outcomes. Justification is about doing something seemingly wrong but feeling moral and asking others to feel the same (Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, & Ayal, 2015). Leaders employing justifications are more likely to be judged as competent, especially by their supporters, compared to those relying solely on excuses, who tend to appear as weak or indecisive (Braaten, Cody, & Bell DeTienne, 1993).

One common form of justification is conveying the message that the apparent reputational problem is not an issue and that the character attacks are unjustified. Critics of the two most famous economists of the past century, John Keynes (1883–1946) and Milton Freedman (1912–2006), referred to a couple of troubling issues in their

biographies: the first apparently praised Nazi Germany's "totalitarian economy" in a 1936 publication; the other wrote an open letter to Chilean dictator Pinochet in 1975. These economists' supporters agree that such publications existed yet justify that both economists were merely explaining their economic theories and not openly supporting dictators or advising them on their policies (Carter, 2020).

Some defend the reputation of dictators, such as Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union or Augusto Pinochet in Chile, and justify their brutal policies by claiming that such policies were inevitable during times of crisis or conflict. Supporters of Pinochet insist that his massive crackdown on civil liberties, tortures, and disappearances of opposition leaders could be justified by the social turmoil as a legacy of a previous socialist government (Long, 2013). Although most Soviets believed that Stalin's death in 1953 put an end to mass repression and terror, almost half of the population of the USSR not long ago believed that the illegal killings, imprisonment, and suffering of millions, for which Stalin was responsible, were justified by the necessity of the rapid economic development of the country (Monaghan, 2015). Such beliefs would have been difficult to maintain these days without a persistent push by the government in Moscow aided by some Russian historians and political scientists.

From the general idea of account-giving many scholars have branched off to theorize about self-defense. While we could have chosen a number of frameworks, we will focus here on William Benoit's image repair theory. Benoit lists five main strategies and several sub-strategies for events in which a person's public reputation can be damaged. According to this theory, there is a threat to a reputation when an individual or organization is accused of being responsible for an action which is considered offensive or wrong by public opinion. Strategies for response stem from denying the offensive action to evading responsibility or even taking corrective action (see Table 8.1).

Image repair often occurs in complex situations. In other words, it is not always simply a single attack followed by a single defense. In the case of Lance Armstrong, accusations and character attacks against him were coming from many sources including athletes, sports reporters, and media commentators. He used denial at first, attacked the reputation of his accusers, then claimed partial responsibility, and then asked for forgiveness. In fact, many politicians use denial as early as the first accusations or character attacks occur. Consider several U.S. Presidents. Nixon denied knowledge of the Watergate break-in and cover up, which eventually cost him the presidency. Reagan denied sending arms to Iran and his popularity declined until he was forced to admit he was wrong and take corrective action (Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991). Clinton categorically denied his affair with Monica Lewinsky and claimed a "vast conspiracy" against him before he was confronted with the evidence (Blaney & Benoit, 2001; Kramer & Olson, 2002).

Although it appears risky for politicians and corporate bosses to engage in mortification, their apologies can work when the audience acknowledges that leaders realize their mistakes and promise to learn from them. However, an apology can intensify negative feelings when the apology is judged as insincere or calculated, or late (De Cremer et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2004). In addition, a full apology may immediately entail legal

TABLE 8.1 Image repair theory

Strategy	Explanation
Denial	Simple denial or shifting the blame The actor simply denies that the act occurred or shifts the blame to the “real” wrongdoer.
Evading responsibility	Responding to a provocation The actor claims that his or her attack was committed in response to another attack, and there was no other way to respond in kind. Claiming defeasibility The actor claims a lack of knowledge or control about important factors. Attributing to an accident The actor suggests that bad accidents just happen. Claiming good intentions The actor suggests the action was justified based on good intentions.
Reduce offensiveness	Bolstering The actor mitigates the negative effects of the attack by reminding the audience of previous accomplishments and good acts. Minimizing The actor attempts to persuade the audience that the act in question is less serious than it appears. Differentiating The actor positions his or her own problems as insignificant compared to other people’s offences or transgressions. Claiming transcendence The actor places the topic in a broader context by claiming priority of more important values (ends justify means). Attacking accuser The actor counterattacks by questioning the credibility of his or her accusers. Offering compensation. The actor offers a compensation or a remedy for an apparent transgression.
Corrective action	Fixing problems or preventing recurrence The actor claims to solve the problem or promises to make changes to ensure the problem will never occur again.
Mortification	Admit responsibility The actor admits responsibility and asks for forgiveness.

Source: Adapted from Benoit, 1995, 2020; Benoit & Brinson, 1999

liability. Hence, the legal department usually recommends against a full apology. A partial apology is typically just an expression of concern and regret which does not carry the same liabilities as a full apology (Coombs, 2019). It is common for CEOs and celebrities to use non-apologies, which sound like apologies but do not acknowledge the person’s responsibility for a certain act or problem. Non-apologies include indicating

LET'S DISCUSS: TO RESPOND OR NOT TO RESPOND?

Perhaps you have heard the argument that some character attacks do not deserve attention. The logic of this argument is that if the side that has launched the attack uses such an undignified method, then the best response is to ignore it. There is another argument, however, which states exactly the opposite. The essence of this logic is that you do not let other people destroy your reputation. If they go “low” against you, you are entitled to use similar methods. As some say, “an eye for an eye.”

Which argument is stronger and under which circumstances? Let's imagine a situation: somebody spreads false information on social media that you have repeatedly plagiarized other peoples' work. You are confident that this information is false, and the accusations are completely wrong. Should you respond to this allegation? Consider four possible scenarios and fallouts.

You do not respond at all and ignore the false information. In this case:

- a. Your friends are likely to praise you for your poise and confidence.
- b. However, your silence and inaction can possibly create a wrong impression among some people who would think that you are guilty or are hiding something from the public.

You respond to the character attack by an emotional rebuttal. In this case:

- c. Your friends will believe you and praise your courage and decisiveness.
- d. However, other people may think that if you are responding, you definitely are guilty of something, or there are some other unpleasant issues associated with your name.

Which scenario, a, b, c, or d would you consider most plausible and why? What factors would you consider most important in making the decision about responding or not responding? Feel free to suggest the context of this exercise (time, place, other details, etc.).

no one should be offended by the situation or apologizing for the emotional harm and anger but not the act (Battistella, 2014). The expression “mistakes were made” is commonly used when acknowledging that a situation was handled inappropriately, with no direct reference to personal responsibility nor implied intent.

Image repair is only one approach to crisis management. **Situational crisis communication theory** also offers several ways to deal with the aftermath of character attacks. This approach borrows from attribution theory, a famous concept in psychology referring to social attributions. In short, classical and modern research in psychology shows that people tend to seek and assign causes for people's actions or events. People either attribute responsibility for the event to the situation (or some external causes) or to the person (or some internal causes) in the situation (McDermott, 2009; Weiner, 1974). Thus, in a hypothetical situation, a character attack against a public official can be interpreted as either an unfortunate occasion (“nobody is without sin, why did they

attack this person?”) or as this official’s own fault (“if there is smoke, there should be fire too: this official must have done something wrong”). The inner psychological mechanism of attributions usually results in three questions: (1) Locus of control: whose fault is it? (2) Stability: is this problem ongoing or not? and (3) Controllability: how can this be changed?

Managing a character attack often means offering particular attributions or explanations to the reading and watching audience. Think for example of a hypothetical case. You are working for a U.S. Senator running for his or her reelection. Suddenly, the opponents start attacking your candidate for the fact that years ago the contender received several speeding tickets when being a junior in college. How would you defend your candidate’s reputation, using your knowledge of social attributions? For example, using the first point, the tickets from twenty years ago can be attributed to immaturity: who did not make similar mistakes in the past? The attack, on the other hand, can be attributed to an attacker’s ulterior motives. Second, the problem with the speeding tickets can be explained as not important in today’s debates about her national political platform. Finally, the traffic tickets can be described as an issue that has been resolved: for so many years the candidate had no further traffic citations.

There could be at least three roles attributed to a target of character attack: victim (no responsibility), accidental (low responsibility), and preventable (high responsibility). The level of responsibility of a target can be zero in situations of false statements or rumors. Low responsibility can be attributed in case of a target being careless. The preventable type includes human error and organizational misdeeds and often is directly associated with character attacks on political and corporate leadership (Coombs, 2007). Some crisis specialists place crisis response strategies on a continuum that moves from a strong defensive position (i.e. attack the accuser) to the most accommodative approach (i.e. issue a full apology).

STAGE THREE: POST-CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Reputation management remains important after a crisis is over. When the immediate threat of a crisis ends, the person who was a target of character assassination should evaluate the quality of the earlier responses and take appropriate preventive actions on the basis of lessons learned. Public figures should respond to the continuing public concerns and update the audience on the actions being taken to prevent future crises. This responsibility continues until all crisis-related obligations related to the character attacks are fulfilled. If they are not, then the public is likely to judge the target very harshly either for not learning from the first experience or for not keeping their implied commitment to correct the issue (Botan, 2018; Coombs, 2019). Reputation is built on matching words and deeds: it comes from a promise delivered or a mistake corrected. New alignments *between words and actions* build new trust (Griffin, 2014).

Managing character attacks should be different in democratic and in authoritarian political systems (we will examine this in more detail in Chapters 10 and 11). Historically, a lack of transparency has usually meant trouble: as many French politicians

found out during the violent phase of the French Revolution known as “the Terror,” false allegations conveyed in character attacks could end careers and often became death sentences. Ruling elites in the Soviet Union, too, used false accusations and character attacks as ominous tactics to intimidate the population and prevent dissent. In transparent political systems, on the other hand, most individuals have a range of opportunities to respond to the attacks against them. The more advanced a country’s democracy is, the more likely its people will use political and legal means to react and defend their reputation. Sure, free speech, as a political freedom, may encourage character attacks: one may, in principle, say anything negative or character damaging against another person. Yet at the same time, free speech has legal limits. Slander, for example, has boundaries. Litigation is a powerful defensive tool against character attacks. In authoritarian systems, on the other hand, such limits against character attacks are for the most part arbitrary, severely limited, or nonexistent.

Of course, a lot in character attacks and reputation management depends on traditions and customs, predominant norms, and social values. In our next chapter we will examine the culture factor.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- There are at least two popular perspectives on how positive and negative reputations are created: the “bank account” and the “halo effect” hypotheses.
- When people fail to address character attacks, they encounter a reputational crisis—a situation when the individual faces serious threats to their reputation and defenses appear unavailable or ineffective.
- In the context of character assassination, public relation (PR) is the professional maintenance of a favorable image of a public figure.
- There are three stages of reputation management: preparedness and prevention, image repair, and post-crisis communication.
- The ultimate objective of activities known as issues management is to find and execute the right strategy that will move a certain problem or an issue from a state of reputation risk to a managed state.
- Like issues management, risk management involves a systematic search for warning signs and threats to individual and organizational reputation to prognosticate the likelihood of a developing crisis.
- Defense against character assassination can be based on the concept of account-giving, including its two forms: *excuses* and *justifications*.
- Image repair often occurs in extremely complex situations. In other words, it is not always simply a single attack followed by a single defense.
- Situational crisis communication theory offers a way to figure out how to deal with the aftermath of character attacks. This approach is grounded in attribution theory.
- Reputation management is also required after a crisis is over. The target of character assassination should evaluate the quality of the earlier responses and take appropriate preventive actions based on lessons learned.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. What would you suggest Lance Armstrong should do about rebuilding his reputation today?
2. Imagine you are a practicing attorney. You must defend in court the reputation of a person who has been a cheater and liar for many years while stealing money from a charity. Obviously, this is not the most pleasant job for a defense attorney. Yet your reputation as a professional is at stake too: you need to choose a character defense strategy that would guarantee a more lenient sentence for your client. Which strategy described in this chapter would you choose and why?
3. You are accused of wrongdoing. Your character is in question. You believe that you have been unfairly accused. Issue a non-apology that could be your character defense. Provide a few options.
4. Think of a case when a person is accused of making a character attack. This person issues a non-apology. Explain scenarios under which this non-apology can be perceived as a new character attack?

KEY TERMS

Attribution theory A theory concerned with the conventions that people use in explaining the causes of behavior and events.

Bank account hypothesis A theory that compares reputation to a bank account in which events that damage one's reputation are withdrawals and events that improve reputation are deposits.

Counter-imaging A strategy that provides the target with a positive frame to counter a label or a negative image imposed on them during a character attack.

Excuses Communication strategies that acknowledge a failure but deny responsibility and generally blame the situation itself or another person instead.

Fiasco vortex A runaway crisis that produces a ripple effect that magnifies destructive information and makes crisis management almost impossible.

Halo effect A cognitive bias when people tend to be influenced by their previous judgments of performance or personality: a good person is not supposed to do bad things; only a bad person does bad things.

Inoculation theory A theory that suggests that an attitude or belief can be protected against persuasion in the same way a body can be protected against viruses through preexposure to weakened versions of a future challenge.

Issues management (IM) A proactive attempt to identify and resolve high-priority issues that could or do present challenges to an individual or an organization.

Justifications Responses that acknowledge a problem or a failure and take some responsibility but claim that the actions of the accused were not harmful or perhaps resulted in positive outcomes.

Public relations A strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics and maintains a favorable public image of a public figure or an organization.

Reputational crisis A negative event that poses a serious threat to reputational assets.
Trust The condition of one's confidence in another person's actions.

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The Culture Factor

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Introduce culture as a factor and a context to examine character assassination.
- Critically discuss how cultural factors impact the process of character assassination.
- Explain the opportunities and challenges inherent to studying character assassination in the context of culture.
- Suggest recommendations to apply the critical knowledge about cultural factors to the study into character assassination.

In March 2015, the South African student and political activist Chumani Maxwele took drastic action at the University of Cape Town. Surrounded by a small group of protesters, he hurled human feces against a statue of Cecil J. Rhodes (1853–1902; see Image 9.1), a British mining magnate and a politician also known for his imperialist and white supremacist views. The group then performed *toyi-toyi*, a traditional protest dance that had often been used in times of apartheid. Rhodes, the target of their attack, had played a leading role in South African politics in the late 19th century (Flint, 1974). Today, he is often seen as having laid the ideological and institutional groundwork for the later apartheid system that rigorously separated white and black South Africans. He championed the expansion of the British Empire and gave his name to Rhodesia, an African region controlled by the British (current-day Zimbabwe and Zambia). In his testament, he stated that “I contend that we [the English] are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race” (Rhodes, 1877).

The protests initiated by Maxwele soon gained ground among other students and faculty at the University of Cape Town. “Rhodes Must Fall” became a rallying cry. In the following weeks, group discussions and protest marches took place. Students occupied a university building. Finally, only a month after Maxwele’s initial action, the university removed the statue of Rhodes from campus. Meanwhile, the protests spread to other South African universities, where students called for the “decolonization of education.” They even reached the University of Oxford in the U.K., where Rhodes

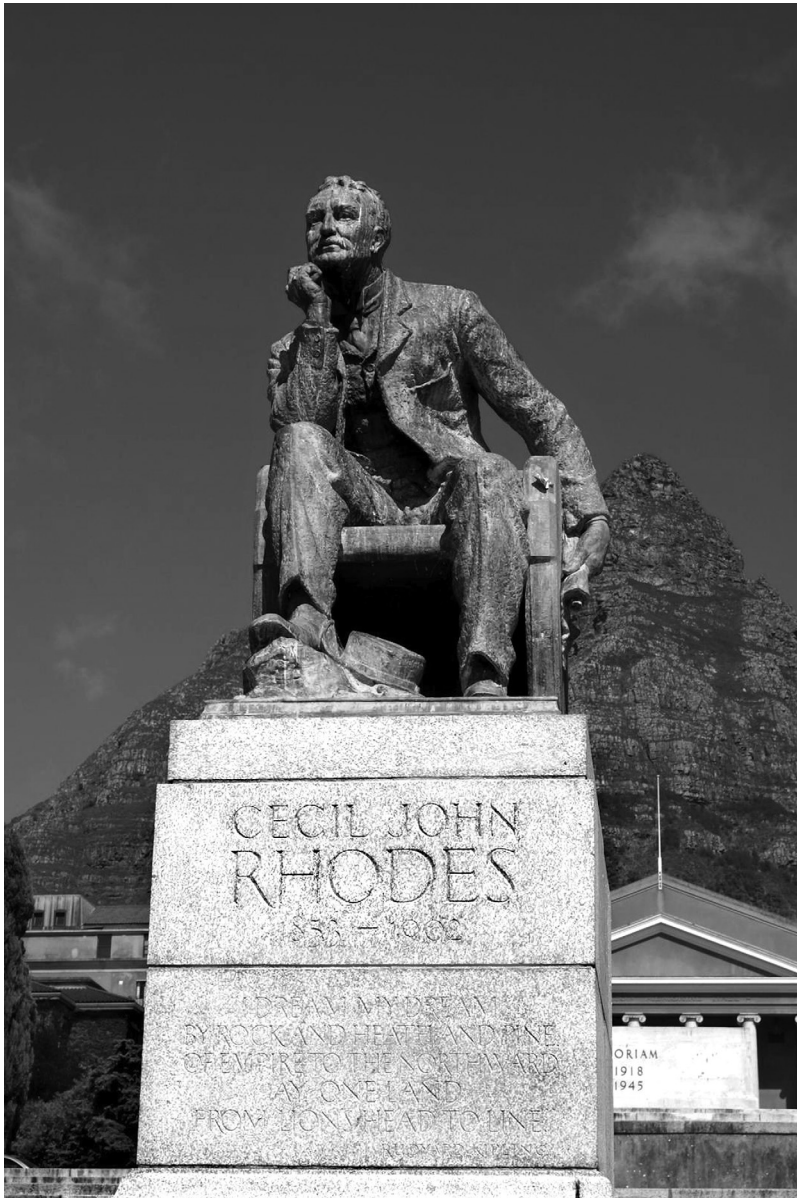


IMAGE 9.1 The statue of Cecil J. Rhodes at the University of Cape Town sparked a wave of student protests in 2015 and has since been removed from campus
Source: Photograph by Danie van der Merwe, CC BY 2.0

had studied and established many prestigious Rhodes Scholarships for international students. Here, too, students called for the removal of a statue of Rhodes from Oriel College. However, these calls went unheeded, as rich sponsors threatened to remove their donations from the university (Espinoza & Rayner, 2017). Five years later, during the 2020 *Black Lives Matter* protests, the clamors to remove the statue rose again.

The *Rhodes Must Fall* movement addressed important issues. The protesters said they rose up against institutional racism and the cultural legacy of colonialism that still pervades the academic system in South Africa and beyond. They attacked Rhodes as a symbol of this legacy. Black South Africans contested his long-cherished status as a great man in a predominantly white British culture. Rhodes's statues at the University of Cape Town and other campuses thus became the focus of a culture clash that brought long-simmering tensions to the surface. It shows that one group's hero can be another group's villain. It also shows how cultural values shift over time. The statues of men and women who have been put on a pedestal by one generation can become a source of anger or shame to the next, who no longer subscribe to the ideals and beliefs these figures were once celebrated for. Even though the target under attack can be a material object, like a granite statue, this object represents someone's historic legacy and reputation. The ultimate judges are the hearts and minds of people today.

ON CULTURE

In the context of the discussion in this chapter, **culture** is a set of attitudes, behaviors, and symbols shared by a large group of people and usually communicated from one generation to the next. No society is culturally homogeneous. No two cultures are either entirely similar or totally different. People can admire similar or different symbols, lose interest in others, or revolt against yet others. Cultures also tend to change and evolve, although the scope or depth of such changes vary tremendously. History provides examples of slow and fast evolving cultural features and entire cultures.

Culture can refer to racial, ethnic, religious, or national groups. Ideological and political affiliations can sometimes be described in cultural terms. It is also appropriate to use cultural terms for age cohorts: people as groups born twenty, or even ten years apart can develop and share different cultural values on justice, equality, or marriage. Within the lives of a generation, the reputation of the older cohorts can appear “old-fashioned” and even “reactionary” in the eyes of the young, who often attack and ridicule their parents' character traits and the symbols with which older generations identified. In turn, the reputation of the young can also be under attack by the older generation: the latter judges the individual characters of the younger cohort as “naïve,” “weird,” or “self-destructive.” Symbols, too, represent cultural values and are linked to individual character and reputation. When values change, the symbols representing them are often removed. As we saw, this happened to the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town. Likewise, statues of the celebrated communist leader Lenin—whose image became a cultural symbol in many countries in the 20th century—fell in many places amidst peaceful protests in Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s because of a tectonic shift in cultural values within a generation of people living in these countries.

If you imagine any country fifty years ago and compare it to its modern days, you will likely see how greatly some views and practices have changed. For example, many people tend to feel differently today about marriage, divorce, physical punishment of children, sexual orientation, the environment, gender roles, or the death penalty—to

name a few—compared to their views in the 1990s. With such changes taking place in the social sphere, in politics, and in people's individual attitudes, there should be corresponding changes in what is considered or associated with a "good character" and individual features referring to it. It was an honor for any person in the former Soviet Union or China of the 1970s to be praised "a true communist": this culturally desirable tag stood for personal modesty, lack of self-interest, honesty, and most importantly—dedication to the government (Zinoviev, 1986). To be attacked for not being "a true" communist could have been the toughest form of character assassination for any public figure in the Soviet Union or China. These days in Russia (and to some degree in China too), labeling someone a "true communist" will sound inappropriate to most people. Throughout this book, we have used many examples across time and space to discuss practices of character assassination in particular cultural contexts. We will examine more cases in this chapter too.

Cultural divisions increase social tensions and create opportunities for character attacks against representatives of opposing groups. Political partisanship, religious strife, class struggle, and ethnic tensions can create a poisonous atmosphere in which people tend to see others as deadly enemies. Cultural diversity is likely to decrease tensions (and the incentives for character attacks), especially if it is embraced by the majority of the people in a society.

Cultures have both *explicit* and *implicit* characteristics. In the context of human behavior, *explicit* characteristics are observable acts that are consistently and regularly found in a culture. These are overt customs, practices, and behavioral responses, such as saying hello to a stranger in a park, removing your hat when entering a temple, or not looking in the eyes of a customer in a grocery store. A relevant example of explicit characteristics is politeness. A mostly overt cultural phenomenon, it is largely about showing respect to other people or their customs and avoiding publicly insulting another person or people through one's words and actions. A person's impolite behavior, such as not taking their shoes off in a house, can easily provoke criticisms and character attacks: "This man is rude!" "This woman has no manners!" Similar behavior is considered acceptable in different places or cultural settings.

Cultural beliefs can dominate in a group or community without being explicitly stated. *Implicit* characteristics refer to the organizing principles that are inferred to lie behind the consistent patterns of explicit culture. Examples of implicit cultural features can include viewing women as a group as weak and inferior to men (yet not stating this opinion in public) or considering mental illness to be a moral transgression (without openly saying so). One obvious symptom of such implicit beliefs is that people who behave in a sexist or bigoted manner do not suffer negative consequences for expressing their opinion: they are relatively immune to character attacks from people who share similar beliefs.

Both implicit and explicit cultural characteristics describe the individual's "good character," which is a culture-based set of symbols and meanings that relate to proper behavior defined by cultural norms. Although these standards vary from culture to culture and may not even be agreed upon within a single culture, they impose limitations on what an individual can do and say without damaging his or her reputation. Religious practices can be a fine illustration here: what is rejected or condemned in the

individual's behavior within one set of religious beliefs can be seen as acceptable in another: look, for example, into food preferences or consumption of alcohol in different religious groups.

In some cultural settings, there is a norm of self-criticism, which is a method of deliberate self-incrimination: people are expected to publicly criticize their own behavior and views. Communist authorities in countries like China and the Soviet Union, especially in the 1940s and 50s, forced many individuals to engage in self-incrimination, thus committing a form of *character suicide*. As we will discuss in Chapter 11, this method—often in the form of mass political campaigns of self-criticism—was used by the autocratic leaders to achieve specific political goals or to settle scores with domestic opponents (Shirayev & Yang, 2014).

Quite often, when a challenge to certain cultural standards becomes strong and lasting, we can talk about a **counterculture**, which displays values and norms of behavior that differ substantially from those of mainstream culture, often in direct opposition to mainstream cultural standards. In the mid-sixties, in the West, many young people turned to a new set of behavioral standards. They preferred spontaneity to hard work, non-violence to war, and free love to monogamy. They would adopt a distinct style of clothing and even slang. Many of them turned to rock music, hallucinogens, and other substances in search for truth, as they often said (Miller, 1991). Scores within this new counterculture pursued different standards of what was considered virtuous in the individual. To some it was a free-spirited being with no material aspirations and without personal obligations and commitments. To others, surprisingly, the new “ideal” was about returning to more traditional norms of a traditional, agricultural society: they rejected the “suburban domesticity” of their mothers to adopt lifestyles close to those of their more distant ancestors, with the emphasis on clean environment, healthy lifestyle, and good parenting (Lemke-Santagelo, 2009).

Countercultures certainly get noticed in the media. The word “hippie” has appeared in the English language and in many others across the globe to describe the followers of this counterculture (see Image 9.2). There were also those who deliberately called themselves hippies in many countries across the world. They drew the attention of the young. Even in the Soviet Union, public school teachers mercilessly criticized hippies, and especially their hairstyles and their worn blue jeans, to scorn the poor lost souls in the decadent capitalist society. Soviet imitators of hippies—there were few but dedicated ones—were character attacked as “parasites” or “mentally ill” for their alleged blind imitation of Western decadence (Tsalik, 2019). In other countries hippies were also character attacked for their lifestyle and, of course, their appearance. In the Netherlands, for instance, the term “long-haired work-shy scum” became current, while the British establishment spoke of “the great unwashed.” The mainstream used the label “hippie” mostly to mock, tease, shame, or smear those who actually were or only appeared to be associated with this counterculture.

While some hippies made a long-term commitment to their values, tie-dye clothes fashion, and an alternative lifestyle, many others finished college, changed their clothes for business attire, and joined the mainstream materialist culture. Critics were after them for being “sellouts” (Heath & Potter, 2004). The hippies were attacked twice in



IMAGE 9.2 In the 1960s and 1970s, hippies were a prominent feature of counterculture in the United States. They pursued leisurely and free lifestyles and wore unique clothing
Source: Boston Public Library, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

history: once for being members of a counterculture and again, for returning to the “mainstream.” Their example also tells us again that as cultural standards evolve so do the cultural criteria by which we evaluate individual characters.

Moreover, we often tend to overuse the term culture to describe a societal trend or a tendency in public opinion. For example, the term **cancel culture**, which emerged in the second half of the 2010s, generally stands for dismissing something or somebody such as a person or an idea. It is about protesting, rejecting, denying, or silencing an individual or a group in most forms of communication, interpersonal or online. It can be seen as a set of stable norms and practices rooted on an assumption that labeling, shaming, silencing, or removing information or a symbol is an efficient way to conduct a political debate. However, it seems that the term “cancel culture” is somewhat misleading and does not have much to do with the broad culture factor discussed in the chapter. This is a form of communication and persuasion, rather than a “culture” which refers mostly to deep seated and stable societal trends and values.

CULTURAL DICHOTOMIES

Cultural similarities and differences can be conceptualized in terms of cultural dichotomies. Among such dichotomies, there are four that concern us here: (1) high/low power distance, (2) collectivism/individualism, (3) high/low uncertainty avoidance, and (4) high/low cultural traditionalism.

Power distance is the extent to which the members of a society accept that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1980). Most people in predominantly high power-distance cultures have to accept inequality between the leaders and the led, the elite and the common, the managers and the subordinates, and breadwinners (such as fathers) and other family members. Studies also show that on the individual level, high power distance scores are connected with an individual's social dominance orientation, a measure of a person's preference for hierarchy and inequality within a social system or culture (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). A "good" character in high power distance culture is attached to people who accept social hierarchy and power distance, and tend to see and treat social, age, gender, ethnic, and other groups as unequal in their status and abilities. Essentially, it is about "we have to know our place."

A person whose beliefs and behavior disrupt the power hierarchy in a culture that embraces power distance is likely to be a target of character attacks. For example, in the high power-distance societies of the Middle Ages, youthful monarchs were among the primary targets of character attacks because their coming-of-age was seen as a challenge to the balance of power. The main perpetrators of these attacks tended to be members of the nobility or the clergy, who played a key part in political and cultural life and wished to maintain the status quo. The cultural climate was susceptible to medical theories, popular at the time, that conceived of youths as transitional creatures who possessed a hazardous mix of manly ("hot") and female ("wet") characteristics. This paved the way for accusing young monarchs of a whole range of character flaws and tyrannical vices, including irrationality, sensuality, and gullibility (Lecuppre, 2014).

Another cultural dichotomy is individualism/collectivism. **Individualism** is complex behavior based on concern for oneself and one's immediate family or small primary group, as opposed to concern for other groups, the larger community, or the society to which one belongs. **Collectivism**, by contrast, is typically interpreted as behavior based on concern for others, community, and common traditions and shared values. Collectivism and individualism are typically described both on the level of so-called "strong" ties (among family members and close friends) and on the level of "weak" ties, which are usually between casual acquaintances (Granovetter, 1973).

Historical examples show that disrupting the behavioral and psychological foundations of collectivism in a collectivist society could be seen as a moral transgression. As we will read in Chapter 10, in Communist China—which could be seen as a predominantly collectivist culture, particularly so in the 1950s—two prominent and relatively young party officials, Gao Gang and Rao Shushi, suddenly found themselves facing a coordinated and vicious character attack orchestrated by the highest leadership. Along with having political and ideological accusations thrown at them, they were accused of numerous "classical" character flaws, including infidelity and plagiarism. They were further publicly condemned for being greedy, arrogant, selfish, and individualistic.

These individual characteristics were incompatible with collectivist communist norms (Shiraev & Yang, 2014).

The common ways in which people handle uncertainty, both in daily situations and in their lives in general, is called **uncertainty orientation**. This phenomenon is measured on a continuum between the dichotomies of uncertainty-acceptance and uncertainty-avoidance. People who accept uncertainty tend to respond to ambiguous situations by seeking information and engaging in activities that directly resolve the uncertainty. People who are certainty-oriented tend to defer to rules, customs, or the opinions of other people, including authority figures, to resolve ambiguity or uncertainty (Sorrentino et al., 2008). When most people accept uncertainty, they rely on rumors and gossip related to other people's characters. Intriguingly, the Latin word *fama* can mean both "reputation" and "rumor" (Meister, 2014, p. 71). Certainty as a cultural feature is likely to create culturally favorable conditions for labeling: clearly identifying a person as a "fool" or "mentally ill" could be enough to destroy his or her reputation and discredit them in the eyes of the public. In societies where the government claims a monopoly on truth or certainty, personal insults dressed in the form of official government statements aim to discredit the reputation of the target. In 2018 and after, Russian authorities, including spokespeople for the Russian President, scorned a doctor who had revealed the allegedly damning details of one of the biggest doping scandals involving the Russian government as "mentally ill" (Peskov, 2018). The doctor, being under the witness protection program in the United States, could not sue for the apparent libel.

Cultural traditionalism is a psychological and behavioral construct based on traditions, rules, symbols, and principles established predominantly in the past. We call such constructs a "traditional culture." The opposite type is non-traditional culture (often called modern culture), which is based on new principles, ideas, and practices. The prevalence of science-based knowledge and technology-driven developments is typically associated with non-traditional cultures.

Traditional cultures, being largely intolerant to innovations, tend to be confined within local and regional boundaries. Non-traditional cultures, by contrast, tend to be trans-border, absorbent and dynamic. That is, whereas traditional cultures embrace only a certain set of ideas associated with a particular religious doctrine, tribe, ethnic group, or territory as part of their reality, the image of reality in contemporary non-traditional cultures is constantly expanding. Traditional cultures share a wide variety of characteristics: for example, a combination of high individual scores in filial piety, conformity, family recognition, emotional self-control, and humility (Park & Kim, 2008). They also strictly define "good" and "bad" character traits. Thus, individuals living in these environments and not conforming to traditional norms become relatively easy targets of character attacks: any deviation from the cultural standard can be considered a personal vulnerability or transgression. Take courtship, for example, or the transitional period in a relationship between two individuals to decide if there will be an engagement followed by a marriage. Courtship is regulated by different cultural norms which determine the length of it, the obligations between the individuals involved, the arrangements, and even the sex of the involved individuals—all these factors are rooted in cultural norms. A person who apparently violates the cultural norms of courtship,

for instance by not asking for parental consent, becomes an easy target of attacks for violating a cultural tradition.

Cultural tightness (often called embeddedness) promotes particular cultural rules and norms. In tight (embedded) cultures, sanctions are applied to those individuals who violate or appear to violate the culture's norms and values. A good example would be Pharaoh Hatshepsut (ca. 1507–1458 BCE), one of ancient Egypt's very few female monarchs. The notion that the ruler always had to be a man was so deeply embedded in Egyptian culture that Hatshepsut preferred to take on an androgynous appearance and was even depicted with the traditional pharaonic beard. Two decades after her death, her name was chiseled off inscriptions and her images were removed from temple walls—probably to erase the memory of a woman who had overstepped tight cultural boundaries (Tyldesley, 1996). Memory erasing, as you should remember, is one of the methods of posthumous character attacks practiced throughout history.

CULTURAL FACTORS OF CHARACTER ATTACKS

Referring to individuals, most of our feelings and behaviors exist simultaneously within at least two dimensions: (1) universal and (2) culture specific. There is a core of central, universal features of human behavior that appear in most cultural and historic settings. At the same time, there are peripheral—though no less important—features that are bound to specific cultural, political, and historic contexts. As we mentioned in Chapter 1, character attacks also have central and peripheral features linked to culture. The criticism of people of power—a central type of character attacks—appears to be as old as human civilization. Likewise, exaggerations, insults, lies, and cheap shots are methods of character attack that appear consistent across cultures. At the same time, character attacks remain very culture-specific when they deal with historic values and cultural taboos that would not translate to another cultural context (Icks & Shiraev, 2014).

This chapter begins with the *Rhodes Must Fall* campaign in South Africa. The toppling of statues of “great men” (very rarely women) has been a recurring feature in world history for millennia, usually occurring in the context of regime change. When a dynasty or political faction was overthrown and replaced by another, their symbols and monuments went out as well. However, in the case of Rhodes, as in the numerous controversies about statues in the *Black Lives Matters* protests, the driving force is not regime change, but a culture clash between two value systems. While Rhodes has been glorified from a British colonial perspective, he became a villain in a South African anticolonial narrative. This goes to show that notions of “good character” do not only evolve over time (as we have mentioned earlier in this chapter) but are also contested *within* a society. In other words, cultural values are dynamic and can become the subject of fierce debate. As we know, social standards can be applied differently to different people. What constitutes a “good character” in the eyes of public opinion depends on many variables, such as one's gender, social class, or ethnicity. This means that a character attack that might be devastating for one person might just be a minor nuisance for someone else. For instance, many societies developed cultural standards

holding women to much higher standards of marital fidelity than men (Scelza et al., 2020). Therefore, when a woman is attacked for being unfaithful, the potential damage to her character is expected to be much greater than when the same happens to a man.

Cultural values often take the form of social prejudices, making marginalized groups in society more vulnerable to character attacks. For example, someone speaking with an accent that is considered provincial would be much more likely to be ridiculed as stupid, boorish, or uneducated than someone who is not (Lippi-Green, 2012). Likewise, in countries with a predominantly Protestant culture a political candidate from a Catholic minority might be given a hard time. Presidential candidate John Kennedy in the 1960 presidential elections in the United States faced this problem: some of his opponents attacked him not necessarily for his policies but for his Catholic faith. They alleged that he would become a convenient “puppet” in the hands of the Vatican (Lepore, 2020). Could he really be trusted with supreme power should he become president? Would he try to force a Catholic agenda upon the nation? Perhaps such misgivings might be phrased even more sharply if the candidate happened to be a Muslim, or Buddhist, or an atheist in a predominantly Christian country.

Another thing to keep in mind is that different societies can have different patterns of character assassination. That is to say, the frequency and fierceness of character attacks within a given society are governed by varying cultural norms and practices. Historically, some cultures and time periods have been characterized by rampant character attacks with very few limitations. In the Roman Republic of Cicero’s day, as we saw in Chapter 2, senators did not shrink back from fiercely criticizing and ridiculing each other’s morals, appearance, and family background. Revolutionary France of the late 1700s was another society in which unbridled slander and mockery defined the political arena (Harder, 2014). In contrast, other cultures have a much lower frequency of character attacks and may have a low tolerance for them.

LET’S DISCUSS

In the process of interpersonal communication, when do we consider a spontaneous remark referring to a person’s cultural identity as a character attack? Of course, direct insults and ethnic slurs are often easy to recognize. In some circumstances they can be criminalized as fighting words—those that tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace. But how do we qualify unintentional or disguised jokes and remarks containing ethnic or other cultural stereotypes? **Stereotypes** are general assumptions that all members of a given group have a particular trait or other characteristics. Asking, even jokingly, an Arab student: “Do you know how to ride a camel?” or a Vietnamese American MBA student, “What business will you manage after graduation, a nail salon?” or a Russian visiting professor, “Sorry, we have no vodka in our house; should I send somebody to buy a bottle?” (unfortunately, one of the authors has

witnessed such remarks being made) can mean to many observers that a person of a certain nationality or ethnicity is automatically associated with or has something to do with camels, nail salons, or alcoholic beverages.

Suggest some real-life examples of ethnic or other cultural stereotypes. Would you consider them character attacks even though they could be unintentional?

You have likely heard about microaggressions, which are statements containing a subtle discrimination or marginalization of an ethnic group. For example, a receptionist in an office is saying to a Korean American student (born and raised in the United States), “Oh, your English is excellent!”—as if a person of Asian ancestry is not supposed to speak perfect English. Would you consider microaggressions as character attacks? When and under which circumstances? Discuss your view.

CULTURE, CHARACTER ATTACKS, AND SCANDALS

Our critical discussion of culture should help in explaining how character attacks become a powerful force behind many **public scandals**, which are usually a pattern of communication associated with disturbing information that produces instability and turmoil in certain social spheres (Haller & Michael, 2019). Scandals are often strong social reactions of anger, fear, or surprise, based on perceived facts or accusations of inappropriate behavior. Character attackers often want to generate public scandals as a way to tarnish the reputation of their target. Most public figures, of course, will go to great lengths to avoid being caught up in a scandal. So why do some character attacks cause scandals, while others do not? It all depends on the response of the audience—the individuals and groups who witness and judge the attacks. Their response, in turn, is to a large extent culturally conditioned. Let’s consider two factors that play a key role in scandalization (Icks & Shiraev, 2019).

The “S” Factor refers to the sensitivity of the topic at hand. Character attacks are likely to succeed in causing a scandal when they are aimed at individual character traits, or specific behavioral acts which are seen as inappropriate, embarrassing, shameful, or immoral in a particular culture. These behaviors and traits commonly refer to the public’s attitudes toward several interconnected and culture-bound areas such as: sexual behavior; sexual identity; mental illness; racial identity; marital responsibilities; corruption; attitudes toward the poor or the afflicted, and other forms of social justice. As we have discussed in this chapter, people’s attitudes toward these topics can vary widely *within* a culture, for instance depending on the gender, class, ethnicity, or generation a person belongs to. Nevertheless, cultures are often defined by dominant cultural norms that are shared by a large proportion of the population. We have also seen that cultures apply different norms to different people. The sensitivity of a given topic is therefore also dependent on the person who is being attacked.

The “Q” Factor” refers to the quality and quantity of character attacks. The *quality* of attacks is determined by the prestige and credibility of the person or organization making the allegations and the seriousness of the alleged flaw or malpractice. It matters, for instance, whether a person is accused of something by an anonymous source on a random “fly-by-night” website, or by an established and well-respected public figure in a well-established medium such as a prime time talk show. Likewise, it matters whether the person under attack is accused of a single misstep (e.g. a married man having a one-night stand with another woman) or of structural misbehavior (e.g. a whole string of extramarital affairs and one-night stands). *Quantity* refers to the scope, frequency, and intensity of attacks. If the accusations are broadcast more widely and repeated more often, they are more likely to do damage.

To cause a scandal, character attacks should be of a particular quality and quantity, plus they should refer to a certain topic to which the public is sensitive at the moment. The sensitivity can be based on a fluid social situation. It also can refer to specific, relatively stable, cultural norms. The quality and quantity of character attacks (the Q factor) as well as the public’s sensitivity (the S Factor) have to breach certain “fault points” or “thresholds,” after which they give rise to particular scandals. We have captured our argument in Figure 9.1

On the horizontal axis (the S Factor), we have plotted the level of cultural sensitivity to certain psychological, behavioral, social, and moral issues. On the vertical axis (the Q Factor), we have plotted the quality and quantity of character attacks. Of course, it’s often hard to quantify such variables as societal sensitivity toward certain issues and the quality of character attacks, if that can be done at all. We should stress

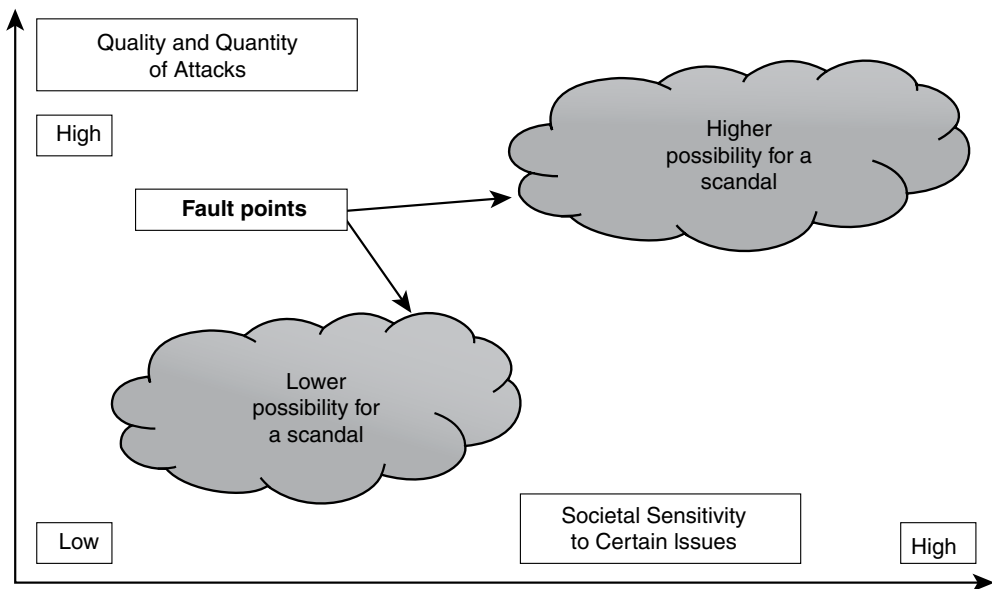


FIGURE 9.1 Scandal thresholds

that his model is not meant to make exact calculations about the chances of scandalization. Rather, it could be a valuable tool to help you think about the dynamics of character assassination and scandal.

Let's discuss some concrete examples. At the end of the 19th century, France was swept up by the Dreyfus Affair, one of the greatest scandals in the country's history. At its heart was Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935; see Image 9.3), a Jewish-French military officer. In 1894, he was accused of being a traitor and a spy who had communicated military secrets to France's arch-rival, Germany. Dreyfus was convicted and imprisoned at Devil's Island, a penal colony at French Guiana. However, new evidence soon surfaced suggesting that Dreyfus had been framed and the actual culprit had been another officer, Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy. Unwilling to admit their mistake and lose face,

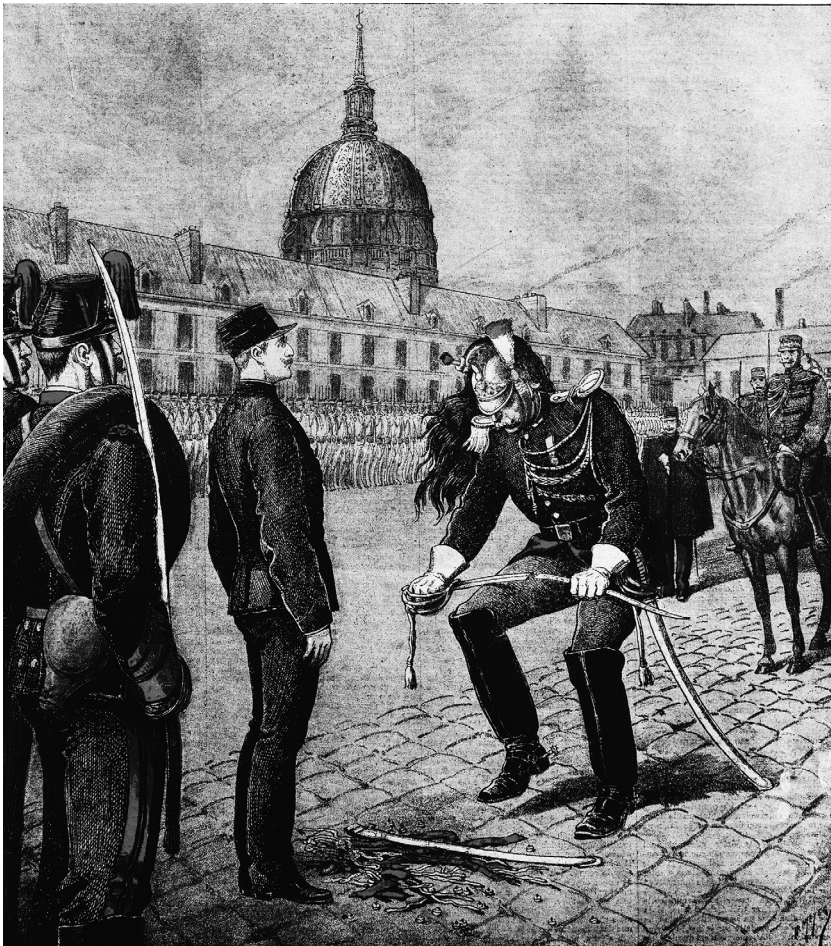


IMAGE 9.3 This 1895 illustration by Henri Meyer is called “Alfred Dreyfus stripped of rank.” It circulated on the cover of *Le Petit Journal*, a conservative publication that was often antisemitic

Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Public Domain

high-ranking military officials tried to suppress the evidence. They acquitted Esterhazy in a show trial and forged documents to prove Dreyfus's guilt. The affair was widely reported in French newspapers and caused a rift in society. The so-called "Dreyfusards" were convinced that the imprisoned officer was innocent and clamored for justice, while the "anti-Dreyfusards" believed that he was indeed a spy and that the evidence was genuine. In 1898, the prominent author Émile Zola published an open letter to the French president in the newspaper *L'Aurore*, entitled "J'Accuse!" ("I accuse!"), alleging that Dreyfus had been set up and demanding that his case should be reopened. Public pressure on the government became so great that a new trial was held in 1899. Although Dreyfus was once again convicted, he received a pardon and was released from prison. Only in 1906 was he finally exonerated and reinstated as a military officer (Burns, 1998).

If we consider this case in terms of its "S" and "Q" factors, it is clear that the sensitivity of the topic in turn-of-the-century France was very high. Treason would be considered a grave crime in any country, especially if the alleged culprit was a military officer charged with the protection of national interests. However, what made the matter really explosive was the fact that Dreyfus was Jewish. In a culture rife with antisemitism, many were prepared to believe that Jewish people could never be truly French and would eagerly betray their country if they would benefit from it personally. The conflict between the Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards could hence be understood as a battle between two groups with different worldviews. While the former tended to be more progressive and open-minded, the latter tended to be more conservative and traditional, identifying strongly with monarchist and Catholic values.

As for the "Q" factor, the quality and quantity of the attacks were also very high. The accusations were made by top military officials and supported by (forged) evidence, which gave them an air of credibility. Moreover, the case was reported on an unprecedented scale in French and foreign media. By the late 19th century, newspapers had really come into their own and reached audiences of millions, shaping public opinion all over Europe. For this reason, the Dreyfus Affair has been considered one of the world's first "mediatized" scandals—a scandal fueled by extensive media coverage (Burkhardt, 2018). Taking all these variables into account, it is not hard to see why the allegations against Dreyfus caused such a massive scandal, severely damaged his reputation, and even led to his imprisonment.

Let's take a more contemporary example. Consider the case of Brett Kavanaugh (b. 1965), who since 2018 is serving a lifetime appointment as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. Every candidate for the position on the Supreme Court in the United States is nominated by the president and must be confirmed by the Senate. Such confirmation hearings in the past often led to a very partisan discussion, as the Anita Hill example from Chapter 5 illustrates. This time, the discussions, which were televised by most major television networks, turned to character issues (Hemingway & Severino, 2019; Kantor & Twohey, 2019).

During the confirmation process (which typically takes a week or even longer) a female professor, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, accused Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her in the early 1980s. Professor Ford stated that at a party, Kavanaugh and his classmate used violence against her, pinned her to the bed, groped her, and tried to pull off

her clothes and covered her mouth to prevent her from screaming. At the same time when these allegations appeared, two other women also openly accused Kavanaugh of sexual misconduct and even gang rape decades ago. Kavanaugh “categorically and unequivocally” denied the accusations.

Tensions were rising—all streamed by the major TV networks and satellite radio stations. Hundreds of people picketed the Hart Senate Office Building in Washington D.C. and demonstrated in other places in the United States, demanding a serious investigation and criticizing Kavanaugh’s nomination. Some carried signs, “We believe survivors” (basically saying the rape survivors must be trusted). Many of the groups even demanded to reject the candidacy immediately and carried signs, “Kavanaugh is a liar,” “Kava-No” (Shugerman, 2018). The British *Guardian* appeared with the headline, “Rapists have no place on the Supreme Court” (Filipovic, 2018).

The opponents of the nomination argued that the seriousness of the charges against Kavanaugh’s character were sufficient to stop the process. His character was questioned and attacked from different angles now. Kavanaugh’s drinking habits, his uneven temper, his flamboyant attitude, and even his goofy comments in the high school yearbook—an album published annually to highlight and commemorate the past year of a school—everything was on public display via live streaming, television, and radio. In short, the debate over Kavanaugh’s candidacy turned rapidly to a passionate debate over his character. It was a massive public scandal. The reasons for its occurrence and significance relate back to the criteria this chapter proposed earlier: The S and the Q factors (cultural sensitivity to the topic and the quality and quality of the character attacks).

2018 marked a period of a powerful social movement involving many women in the United States, Europe, and worldwide revealing their stories of surviving sexual misconduct and sexual violence against them in the past. In part such revelations were inspired by several high-profiled media reports and other stories of gross sexual misconduct by top-level celebrities. Most women went on social media, using #MeToo as a hashtag, which became a symbol of women’s social awareness about sexual harassment and assault. #MeToo was an important cultural shift in perceptions and reaction to sexual harassment in all areas of life.

There were many people who, on the other hand, focused on the Q factor: the credibility of character attacks. Kavanaugh received strong support from Republicans and others who rejected “she says, he says” allegations as insufficient for due process. There were many demonstrations and rallies in support of Kavanaugh, who described the allegations against him as “a political hit” to “search and destroy” his character. Senator Graham from South Carolina passionately said, “This is the most unethical sham since I’ve been in politics and if you really wanted to know the truth, you sure as hell wouldn’t have done what you’ve done to this guy!” (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2018). In the end, Judge Kavanaugh was confirmed by the United States’ Senate. Yet the consequences of the scandal are likely to linger and remain associated with his name and reputation.

It is very probable that the Kavanaugh case—had it happened in the 1950s or 1960s—would not have generated a similar social and political scandal because of the cultural environment of that time. There are many aspects of behavior and judgement to which most people are more aware and sensitive today than they were fifty years

ago. This also has a lot to do with the type of political system in which people live. We are turning to these systems in the following two chapters.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Culture is a set of attitudes, behaviors, and symbols shared by a large group of people and usually communicated from one generation to the next. Culture can refer to racial, ethnic, religious, or national groups. Ideological and political affiliations can sometimes be described in cultural terms.
- Cultural divisions increase social tensions and create opportunities for character attacks against representatives of opposing groups. Cultural diversity is likely to decrease tensions, especially if it is embraced by the majority of the people in a society.
- Both implicit and explicit cultural characteristics describe the individual's "good character," which is a culture-based set of symbols and meanings that relate to proper behavior defined by cultural norms. Although these standards vary from culture to culture and may not even be agreed upon within a single culture, they impose limitations on what an individual can do and say without damaging his or her reputation.
- Cultural similarities and differences can be conceptualized in terms of cultural dichotomies. Among such dichotomies, four important ones are: (1) high/low power distance, (2) collectivism/individualism, (3) high/low uncertainty avoidance, and (4) high/low cultural traditionalism.
- Referring to individuals, most behavioral, emotional, and cognitive phenomena reveal themselves simultaneously within at least two dimensions: (1) universal and (2) culture specific.
- A critical discussion of culture should help in explaining how character attacks become a powerful force behind many public scandals, which are usually a pattern of communication associated with disturbing information that produces instability and turmoil in certain social spheres.
- Why do some character attacks cause scandals, while others do not? It all depends on the response of the audience—the individuals and groups who witness and judge the attacks. Their response, in turn, is to a large extent culturally conditioned. The "S" Factor refers to the sensitivity of the topic at hand. The "Q" Factor" refers to the quality and quantity of character attacks.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Apply the four cultural dichotomies to your own country. How would you say your country ranks—compared to other countries—in terms of power distance, collectivism versus individualism, uncertainty avoidance and cultural traditionalism?
2. Think of a few cultural divisions (in behavior, customs, or beliefs) in your country. Can you think of examples where those divisions have been used to launch character attacks against those who are culturally different?

3. Search online and pick a recent political scandal, something that happened in the last three or four months. Now assess this scandal in terms of its “S” and “Q” factors. How culturally sensitive was the topic? Was the scandal ignited by character attacks? If so, what was the quality and quantity of those attacks?
4. Think of a few stereotypes that other people can associate with you because of your cultural identity. How would you respond to a person who unintentionally uses a cultural stereotype in a conversation with you?

KEY TERMS

Cancel culture Protesting, rejecting, denying, or silencing an individual or a group in most forms of communication, interpersonal or online.

Collectivism Behavior based on concern for others, community, and common traditions and shared values.

Cultural traditionalism A psychological and behavioral construct based on traditions, rules, symbols, and principles established predominantly in the past.

Counterculture A display of values and norms of behavior that differ substantially from those of mainstream culture, often in direct opposition to mainstream cultural standards.

Culture A set of attitudes, behaviors, and symbols shared by a large group of people and usually communicated from one generation to the next.

Individualism Behavior based on concern for oneself and one’s immediate family or small primary group, as opposed to concern for other groups, the larger community, or the society to which one belongs.

Power distance The extent to which the members of a society accept that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally.

Public scandal A pattern of communication associated with disturbing information that produces instability and turmoil in certain social spheres. Public scandals are usually associated with people’s strong negative reactions.

Stereotypes General assumptions that all members of a given group have a particular trait or other characteristics.

Uncertainty orientation A measurement on a continuum between the dichotomies of uncertainty-acceptance and uncertainty-avoidance. People who accept uncertainty tend to respond to ambiguous situations by seeking information and engaging in activities that directly resolve the uncertainty.

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Character Assassination in Democracies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe the different features of democratic societies.
- Explain the role of character in democratic societies.
- Explain the mutual relationship between character assassination, information, and democracy.
- Apply knowledge about character assassination to the study of democratic societies.

Early in the year 424 BCE, during the annual Lenaia festival, the people of Athens gathered in the Theatre of Dionysus (see Image 10.1). There, under the sunny Mediterranean sky, they were treated to a performance of *The Knights*, the latest comedy by Aristophanes, the most celebrated comic playwright of the age. Although Aristophanes's plays had fictional plots and featured (mostly) fictional characters, they always alluded to contemporary issues and events, not unlike TV shows like *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, or *Family Guy* do today.

The Knights tells the story of Paphlagon, a slave in the household of the elderly Mister Demos of Pnyx Hill. Paphlagon is a loud-mouthed, boorish man who sucks up to his master, but terrorizes the other slaves—so much so that two of them decide to get rid of him. In order to achieve their goal, the conniving duo call upon a passing sausage seller, a man even more brazen and boorish than Paphlagon himself. Slave and sausage seller start a competition for Demos's favor, trying to outdo each other in flattering and pampering the old man. Through his brazenness and lack of scruples the sausage seller ultimately wins, usurping Paphlagon's privileged position. At the end of the play, he appears side by side with Demos, who has been miraculously transformed into a young man again. Meanwhile, the spurned Paphlagon has been reduced to selling sausages at the city gate (MacDowell, 1996, pp. 80–112).

For its Athenian audience, the symbolism of the play would have been crystal clear. Old man Demos naturally stood for the Athenian *demos*, the collective of voting



IMAGE 10.1 This is what the Theatre of Dionysus, where Athenians would have watched *The Knights*, looks like today

Source: Photo by Palickap, CC BY-SA 4.0

citizens, who frequently gathered on Pnyx Hill. The boorish, flattering slave Paphlagon was meant to evoke the contemporary politician Cleon. In fact, Aristophanes shifts between both identities, sometimes presenting Paphlagon as a powerful slave, sometimes as a powerful Athenian politician. There was also a chorus of knights who gave the play their name. They represent the city's aristocracy who traditionally fulfilled the role of cavalry in its citizen-army (MacDowell, 1996, pp. 80–112). The knights leave little doubt what they think of Paphlagon/Cleon and his politics: “You filthy disgusting shout-downer, your brazenness fills the whole land, the whole Assembly, the taxes, the indictments and lawcourts! You muckraker, you who have thrown our whole city into a sea of troubles, who have deafened our Athens with your bellowing, watching from the rocks like a tuna fisher for shoals of tribute!” (as cited in Henderson, 1998, pp. 303–312).

As this tirade makes clear, Cleon was a highly controversial politician. In previous generations, the city's leaders had often been men from aristocratic backgrounds, such as the famous Pericles. Cleon lacked such credentials: he was no nobleman, but a successful business owner who had gotten rich through the earnings of his tannery. His influence did not derive primarily from holding public office, but from the persuasive speeches he delivered in the people's assembly. Apparently, he was a master at playing on the emotions of his fellow citizens and getting them to see things his way

(Connor, 1971). In Aristophanes's unflattering portrayal, he becomes a bully and a troublemaker who flatters and deceives the *demos* to achieve his own selfish goals. The play emphasizes Paphlagon/Cleon's boorish manner to contrast his "lowly" origins to the nobility of the knights. In the eyes of the traditional-minded playwright, things would be much better if men from the upper classes still led the Athenian people (Lind, 1990). For a brief time, it seemed that the people agreed: they awarded *The Knights* first prize in that year's dramatic competition. However, those same people would soon after elect Cleon to the office of *strategos* (general). Apparently, they enjoyed seeing their politicians ridiculed but kept voting for them anyway.

ON DEMOCRACY

The Knights is one of the first plays in history to lampoon an individual politician. The fact that a leading public figure like Cleon could be ridiculed so openly is testimony to the free speech Athenians enjoyed. At the same time, *The Knights* is a critical reflection on the functioning of a democratic system. Aristophanes was a proponent of democracy, but he also saw the dangers of persuasive demagogues catering to the whims of the *demos* and leading them astray. In that regard, not much has changed since the days of Classical Athens. The reason *The Knights* still works as a play is that Paphlagon/Cleon's fawning to Demos is all too familiar to modern-day viewers. In a democratic society, whoever manages to win the support of the people gets to wield political power. Projecting "good character" is a vital part of winning the people's trust. But the opposite is also true, as Aristophanes was well aware: undermining a politician's character may undermine the trust the voters have in them and thus diminish their political influence. Because of this dynamic, democracy and character assassination are strongly intertwined.

Of course, we should keep in mind that Athenian democracy—which only flourished for a brief period in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE—was vastly different from anything we know today. There was no president or prime minister, no senate or parliament, nor were there any political parties. And while Cleon got elected to a generalship repeatedly, most other public offices were filled through a process of lottery, which meant that any random citizen could end up in a leading position. Above all, Classical Athens was a **direct democracy**, a political system in which people decide on various initiatives openly and directly. Its citizens did not leave it to chosen or allotted representatives to decide things for them but took matters into their own hands. In frequent meetings, they discussed and voted on important issues—whether or not to continue the war with Sparta, for instance, or how to invest the money coming from the city's silver mines. It was at such meetings that Cleon could shine by using his skills as an orator. The system worked because it functioned on a small scale. Athens was just one city-state, not a country with millions of inhabitants. Besides, only a fraction of the population actually had the vote: women, slaves, and foreigners were all excluded (Blackwell, 2003).

In general terms, **democracy** is a form of government that relies on the consent of the governed. As Abraham Lincoln famously described in the Gettysburg Address, it

is a form of government “of the people, for the people, and by the people.” Of course, most democracies are not what we would call “direct democracies” like ancient Athens. Unsurprisingly, this is a costly and slow way of making laws. It is far more common for democracies to operate representatively—citizens elect representatives to represent them in a council, congress, or parliament. It is these representatives who participate in deliberations about governing the country. **Representative democracy** is a system in which elected individuals represent groups of people. Under this system, the ways people perceive their representatives may influence how they view policies.

Democracies can be organized in many different ways. Many Western countries, including the United States, are republics led by an elected president. Others, such as the United Kingdom and Sweden, are constitutional monarchies where a king or queen is the symbolic head of state, but actual political power resides with the prime minister, who is the elected head of government. Some countries have a two-party system. Japan, South Korea, Mexico, and many Western countries have a parliament consisting of multiple political parties. These countries tend to be governed by coalitions. The Netherlands, for instance, often has more than ten different parties represented in its parliament! Despite such national differences, there are a number of characteristics of democracies that tend to support the general idea of a form of government that relies on the participation and consent of the governed. Democracies lie along a continuum. Some are strongly and more fully democratic, striving to heed the will of the majority while protecting minority rights, and others exemplify only some elements of democratic governance.

One last thing to note about democratic governments in general before we dig deeper into the role of character and character assassination within them is that communication is central. It is not just citizens that need to have freedom of speech to dissent against the government and the freedom to vote for the political party of their choice, however. Democratic principles enshrine a robust press and media system as a check on governmental power as well. Thus, democracies are best when there is a spirited debate among politicians, citizens, and members of the media about what effective policy, priorities, and principles should be.

We have already identified character assassination as a communication process designed to accomplish immediate or strategic goals. It should start to become clearer how common character assassination is in a democracy where these multiple actors are vying for influence.

DEMOCRACY AND CHARACTER

What role does character play in democracy? While we have thus far identified some of the key elements and operational structures of democracies, we have not said too much about the role of politicians and representatives in these democracies. How do citizens in democratic societies make decisions about who to vote for? Ideology, party affiliation, problems, and issues—they all matter. But the individual character of those who represent people in public offices is very important too. This is especially the case

when citizens—for whatever reason—are disengaged from politics. It has become commonplace to assert that George W. Bush received enough votes to be elected the 43rd president of the United States because so many voters would want to have a beer with him (Raymond, 2015). And this phrase does not only refer to Bush! We often think about political candidates as being “the kind of people” who think like us, to whom we would compare ourselves, or whom we trust. So, trustworthiness, character, and authenticity are key components of democratic politics.

We have discussed what we mean when we describe someone’s character earlier in the book. To reiterate, while character can be notoriously challenging to define, we typically are referring to stable traits that make an individual who they are and are understood in terms of being “good” or “bad.” It makes sense, then, why character would be important in a democratic government. Although this may be changing, most people prefer to elect someone to govern them who they trust to represent their interest and to be a good person. Of course, how people come to see a political candidate as having a strong and trustworthy character varies a great deal. One of the challenges regarding the character of presidential candidates is that, at least in the United States, citizens have historically been suspicious of politicians and the government. In fact, an April 2019 poll revealed that only 17 percent of Americans trust the government in Washington to do what is right most of the time (Pew Research Center, 2019).

It is very difficult to determine what exactly a good character entails for politicians, but at least in the United States, two interconnected components, authenticity and trustworthiness, seem to be central. **Trustworthiness** is the quality of being viewed as reliable, honest, and dependable. When people see a public figure as a person “does what she says,” this is a good sign of trustworthiness and most likely, people’s support during elections. **Authenticity** encompasses some of the elements of trustworthiness and can loosely be defined as a political character that entails honesty, integrity, and transparency (Louden & McCauliff, 2004). In short, do the political candidates seem to be who they say they are? One of the reasons that we know authenticity is important for political candidates is the frequency with which it is used in character attacks. In fact, accusations of hypocrisy or “flip flopping” are very common character attacks against presidential candidates in the United States. A prominent ad during the 2004 presidential election, which pitted Democrat John Kerry against Republican George W. Bush, showed Kerry windsurfing and changing directions to illustrate his inconsistent policy positions (“Memorable Campaign Ads”). These attacks indicate that a candidate who changes their mind all the time is untrustworthy and does not have a strong moral center or core. They will say whatever is popular in order to get elected. Such candidates are not authentic and are often met with suspicion and open to character attacks.

So, if appearing untrustworthy and changing one’s mind on policy positions will make a candidate seem unauthentic, how can politicians convince their electorate that they *are* authentic? Language and media scholar Martin Montgomery (2017) argued that authenticity politics was a key part of the appeal of Donald Trump. While Trump did not appear to many as a trustworthy or even a good person, he did appear authentic in his willingness to say or tweet whatever he thought, seeming basically “unfiltered.”

One of the other things that candidates often try to do to seem authentic is share their biography in such a manner that helps the public understand who they truly are and where they came from. In fact, the biographical campaign ad is almost a necessary campaign tactic. To take one powerful example, Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign released both a long video and a shorter advertisement entitled "The Man from Hope," a reference to Hope, Arkansas, where Clinton grew up. The campaign spot featured old photos of Clinton and a voiceover reflecting on how growing up poor in Arkansas shaped his desire to serve a country that still gave him opportunities to succeed. He discusses working part-time jobs to pay his way through law school and his yearn to make the world a better place. Clinton's ad is noteworthy because it represents such a typical example of the genre.

Most candidates release ads like this to help the public see where they came from and to connect that upbringing with a desire to serve the country. There are other ways that candidates can strive to appear authentic in the media age, such as using social media to give the public a "behind the scenes" glimpse at their campaign. American politicians like Beto O'Rourke and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (see Image 10.2), for example, routinely use Instagram or Facebook Live videos that show a livestream of them in their homes or even at dentist appointments. Speaking to the public in these everyday situations helps to show that they are like us.

Authenticity as a metric of character also has its pitfalls, though. Because character is always judged in the eyes of the public, and because we always react to politicians through lenses that are gendered and racialized, authenticity comes to mean different things for female candidates and people of color. Consider, for example, that one of the critiques of former president Barack Obama when he was running for office was that he was not "black enough." Writer and social critic Ta-Nehisi Coates, for instance, wrote this in *Time* magazine in 2007, "As much as his biracial identity has helped Obama build a sizable following in middle America, it also opened a gap for others to question his authenticity as a black man." Coates then went on to critique the racial politics in the United States that led many to ask, "Is Obama black enough?" (Coates, 2007).

A similar double-edged "authenticity" sword applies to women. While gender norms are slowly changing, the expectation is largely that women make their strongest contributions to society as wives and mothers and that there is something inauthentic about a woman seeking political power in the United States. We will discuss the question of character and gender in more detail in Chapter 13, but for the time being, it is important to note that women who adopt stereotypical masculine characteristics like appearing strong and tough on the campaign trail are typically seen as inauthentic, shrill, and arrogant (Astor, 2019). In fact, many politicians, including Hillary Clinton, will create campaign ads that emphasize their roles as mothers and grandmothers as a way to appear authentically in line with stereotypical gendered expectations for women. Thus, in asking our political candidates to appear authentic, we may also be asking them to conform to our stereotypical views of what women are like and what people of color are like. And, since political leadership has long been tied to characteristics held by white men, in appearing authentically female, candidates may ultimately end up showing themselves to be unelectable.



IMAGE 10.2 Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) is known for her effective use of social media to portray herself as an authentic fighter for the working class and her constituents

Source: Senate Democrats, CC BY 2.0

Clearly then, a politician's gender, ethnicity, and other social markers influence the character standards to which he or she is held by voters. But that is only half the story. The standards for "good character" do not only change according to who is being judged, but also according to who is doing the judging and under what circumstances. In other words, different groups of voters tend to value character-related features differently. For instance, progressive voters may not care that a political candidate is openly gay or may even count it as a point in his favor that he is honest about his sexual orientation, while conservative voters may be more inclined to take a negative view. Likewise, voters may be more or less favorably disposed toward a particular character

trait of a political candidate based on their own age, gender, ethnicity, class, or religious convictions, among other factors.

What holds true for social groups *within* a culture also holds true for entire cultures on a national or even international level. That is to say, character standards may not only be different between American men and women, between young and old Americans, and between Americans of African and Anglo-Saxon descent—on top of that, the American voting public *as a whole* may value particular character traits differently from, say, the French, German, or Japanese voting public. After all, what constitutes “good character” is culture dependent. The social psychologist Geert Hofstede has developed an influential system to measure cultural differences between countries. Originally based on large-scale international surveys he conducted for the tech company IBM, he postulated various “cultural dimensions” to chart a country’s national culture. Among others, these include individualism versus collectivism and masculinity versus femininity, with the latter indicating the extent to which a country values competition and achievement (“masculinity”) versus caring for others and quality of life (“femininity”) (Hofstede, 2001).

TABLE 10.1 Democracy and possible vulnerabilities for character attacks

Core elements of democracy	Vulnerabilities relevant to character attacks
The ability of any adult citizen to run for office if desired.	Individuals running for offices often are not scrutinized by the system and thus may carry unexpected or untested reputational problems.
Free and fair elections where citizens can choose among at least two candidates or parties.	Competitiveness of elections on all levels often mobilizes methods of negative campaigning, including character attacks.
The freedom of dissent for those who disagree with the ruling party.	Disagreements with the majority often provokes open criticism from those in the minority.
Protection of human rights, especially for those in the political minority.	Protection of the rights of groups does not bring serious legal or political limitations on personal attacks against politicians and candidates for office.
Freedom of the news media and press to challenge and critique those in power.	Freedom of speech gives individuals and groups substantial rights in expressing their critical views, whether they are objective or not.
A vibrant civil society where citizens can organize and form groups to enact political change.	Free associations often result in “echo chambers” in which the views of a particular group are encouraged and the opposite views are shut down.
A culture of public communication for citizens to debate and deliberate.	In this culture, all sides look for new clever and sophisticated methods of personal attacks.

Note: Political communication scholar Richard Perloff identifies seven core elements necessary for democratic government (Perloff, 2017). Here we suggest possible “vulnerabilities” of democracy that can be conducive to character attacks

Although Hofstede's system finds its main applications in international business and communication, it has relevance for politics as well. For instance, surveys indicate that American culture scores high on masculinity (62 out of 100) and particularly high on individualism (91), whereas Danish culture is a lot less "masculine" (16) and quite less individualistic (74) than the U.S. (Hofstede Insights). Such national values influence how American and Danish voters view and value the character of their politicians. Of course, we need to keep in mind that these are broad generalizations. Knowing something about the cultural values of the Danish as a national group does not tell us anything about the values of an individual Danish woman. But in democracies, it is all about numbers—and when large groups of voters consider a particular character trait as undesirable, politicians who are associated with that trait become vulnerable to attack.

We do not want to portray democracy as a flawless system in which the communication process in politics and in business is always rooted in kindness, factual evidence, and respect for the opponent. Despite its relative transparency and accountability of public offices, democracy has many weaknesses that are embedded in its institutions and the democratic political process. Table 10.1 briefly outlines such vulnerabilities related to character attacks.

DEMOCRACY AND CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

It should be clear, then, that character assassination is a feature of the democratic process. Because impressions of character are often central to how people make decisions about who to vote for in representative democracies, character becomes an important avenue of attack from political or ideological opponents. For example, vicious character attacks against presidential candidates are as old as democratic electoral campaigns themselves.

To take a few examples, during the 1800 U.S. presidential campaign, pamphlet writers for the rivals John Adams and Thomas Jefferson openly smeared the opposite candidate. Insults like "hypocrite," "criminal," "tyrant," "hideous hermaphroditical character," "libertine," and "anarchist" represent just a short list of what people wrote or said. As we saw in Chapter 2, Abraham Lincoln six decades later was mercilessly attacked in papers and pamphlets with mockeries and cheap shots calling him an "ape," a "baboon," a "monster," an "idiot," and a "cross between the nutmeg dealer, the horse-swapper, and the night man" (Shiraev & Keohane, 2020).

As you already know, character assassination is not limited to personal insults or cheap shots. For centuries, character attacks in democratic elections have also involved deliberate misquoting, gross exaggerations, anonymous lies, accusations of immorality, conspiracy rumors, falsifications, or even vandalism against presidents' images.

Campaigning is an art of calculation and intuition. It seems a simple task: as a candidate you design a platform, explain it to the voter, campaign on your message, and try to get elected. Sure, you can criticize your opponent's policy priorities. So why would you attack other candidates' character and personality? The answer is because character attacks work! Why? Character attacks are effective because they first and

foremost create confusion among the reading and watching public. When fake letters attributed to George Washington were published in 1776, they cast him as cowardly, scared, and neurotic. The authors of these fakes did not try to emotionally hurt the future president. Their goal was—by portraying Washington as spineless and morally weak—to discourage his supporters within the army and among the population (Shikraev & Keohane, 2020).

Character attacks can also sway the undecided. When Franklin D. Roosevelt's opponents relentlessly attacked him in 1944 for the alleged inappropriate use of the United States' Navy for personal business—like taking care of his dog Fala—the goal was not to “convert” FDR supporters but to scoop a few uncommitted voters (see Image 10.3). If a voter is uncertain, even a small allegation could help in creating a commitment.



IMAGE 10.3 President Franklin D. Roosevelt's enemies attacked him for using the resources of the government including the U.S. Navy to take care of his beloved dog, Fala

Source: FDR Presidential Library & Museum, CC BY 2.0

LET'S DISCUSS

When the Nixon campaign in 1972 made use of the “three A’s” used to describe the politics of opponent George McGovern—“amnesty (for draft dodgers), abortion, and acid”—this offensive labeling was not necessarily meant to scare away McGovern’s die-hard supporters. They all were committed to vote for him regardless of persistent character attacks against “their guy.” No, the three A’s were those emotional tweezers to deliver an additional motivational pinch (not even a punch) to enliven those Nixon supporters who were in favor of their candidate but still a bit lazy to go out and actually vote. So cheap shots and smears actually worked? Really?

What is the point of going extremely negative, especially when it is next to impossible to change the minds of those who already made their choices? Expectedly, and what research also suggests, character attacks work because the negativity can sway undecided voters. But what if there are no more people undecided? Indeed, in the 2020 U.S. election, millions voted by absentee ballot weeks before the election. Yet even among those who planned to vote in person, there was almost no indication that they would change their minds as the election approached.

Yet here comes one of the least-talked-about electoral strategies. In close elections, you try to stir up your base, especially the remaining uncommitted-to-vote supporters. Those who are the least convinced, the least persuaded, and the least motivated—they can still cast their vote for your party and candidates *if* they are sufficiently motivated to show up to the polls. With election battles so close, especially in battleground states, every percentage point counts. The Biden campaign resorted to the favorite tactic of front-runners, which is “do not make a dumb mistake,” while the Trump campaign tried to go negative all the way using a powerful approach: convince the idle and the unbothered that if the other side wins, something terrible will happen to them and to all.

According to the TTT or **toothpaste tube theory** in political psychology, there will always be an outcome from persistent pressure, just as when we squeeze a toothpaste tube, something will come out. Calling Joe Biden’s family a “criminal enterprise” and returning to the familiar chant of “lock him up” may be seen by some voters as extreme and ineffective. But this can be very effective among those who already support President Trump yet have little determination to vote. By attacking opponents, you do not necessarily attract the independents, you mobilize your own uncommitted base. Presidential campaigns freely used “toothpaste tactics” in the past, as you have read in this chapter. While these tactics were not always successful, there are many instances in which they worked (Shiraev & Keohane, 2020).

An 1800 newspaper stated that with Thomas Jefferson as commander in chief, “Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced.” This slanderous statement might have caused an angry reaction among Jefferson’s supporters, who could have ignored such publications. However, could they have sparked the motivation of some of Jefferson’s opponents to vote against him? Under what circumstances could character attacks de-motivate you personally to vote for your candidate?

As we have learned in earlier chapters, character attacks can also mobilize the base of the attacking side. They may appear unpleasant, wrong, and even disgusting in the eyes of many, but if tailored to people already opposed to a candidate, they can work. George H.W. Bush in 1992 was persistently ridiculed as being aloof and out of touch with ordinary Americans—after he had been visibly amazed by an electronic scanner in a supermarket. Opponents thought if this old man does not know how scanners work, how could he possibly tackle national problems? Research shows that supporters tend to ignore the attacks against their candidates. Opponents, on the other hand, get more encouraged to vote their way (Shiraev & Keohane, 2020).

A candidate’s origin, gender, social status, religious or professional affiliation, and private life are easy themes of character attacks. Using an attack to exploit a candidate’s family issues, past relationships, or behavioral traits including mental health could be effective too. Presidents Reagan, Nixon, Clinton, and Obama experienced plenty of such attacks. A few people here, a few people there . . . A sliver of doubt in an unsure supporter or an undecided voter, caused by a character attack, may affect these individuals’ voting preferences and intentions. Even the smallest decline of public support for a candidate or increase of support for another one makes character attacks successful.

Because elections in democracies are often highly partisan, they attract a great deal of media coverage, and as a result, the media become a key component of how character assassination plays out on democracies. While we have already discussed some features of the media that relate to character assassination, it is worth thinking a little bit more about how these relate to democratic government.

For one, the media have been conceived of as a check on the power of politicians and elected officials. As Thomas Jefferson noted:

I am . . . for freedom of the press, and against all violations of the constitution to silence by force and not by reason the complaints or criticisms, just or unjust, of our citizens against the conduct of their agents.

(qtd. in Milikh, 2017)

Thus, the media and the press exist to balance the power of the government and to make citizens aware of things they may not be able to independently verify. This means

that the press often discovers when officials are lying, cheating, or engaged in other activities that do not serve the public. Indeed, as rhetoric scholar Shawn J. Parry-Giles (2014) explains in her study of how the media covered Hillary Clinton, the media are often the arbiter of which candidates are seen as authentic and likeable. This is because we often operate from the assumption that politicians are not trustworthy, so the media set out to find examples of the inauthentic (p. 12).

Again, because elections are such a prominent part of democratic politics, the media cover them closely. This often results in **horse race coverage**. It is defined as media coverage that focuses solely on who is winning or losing based on particular opinion polls, to the detriment, its critics say, of devoting time and column inches on “the real issues” (Mutz, 1995; Shafer, 2019). This coverage defines politics as a game, and talks about campaigning in the metaphor of sports, seeking evidence that, just like in a horse race, one candidate has nudged slightly ahead of another. One study of the 2008 election in the United States found that in the first five months of 2007, 63 percent of campaign stories focused on political and tactical campaigning, 17 percent highlighted the personal backgrounds of candidates, 15 percent examined the candidates’ ideas and policies and only 1 percent of stories dug up candidates’ records or past public performance (Nisbet, 2010). Thus, we can see that horse race coverage is often quite prominent. While some writers defend horse race coverage as an important part of letting voters know where the candidates stand (Shafer, 2019), others say that it trivializes politics and directs focus away from actual policy proposals (Morrill, 2019; Myers, 2019). Of course, in shifting attention away from issues and toward ethereal opinion polls, this type of coverage increases the significance of journalist-produced impressions of authenticity and character.

As a result of needing to inch ahead in the ever-present polling, candidates will often agonize over the decision to “go negative.” Negative campaign advertisements are also a staple in democratic governments where the media are considered a prominent way to reach out to undecided voters. Negative ads have been around for centuries, and even the recent excavation of Pompeii shows negative political messages on fences and tombstones (Strother, 2019)! Negative campaigning is on the rise. According to one study, in the 1960s, only 10 percent of U.S. campaign advertisements were negative, but in 2012, only about 14 percent of advertising was *positive* (Dowling & Krupnikov, 2016). While many candidates pledge to run issue-driven campaigns that are positive, the temptation to produce and disseminate attack ads is strong, and it seems that many candidates give in to the desire to smear their opponents as liars, hypocrites, philanderers, and many other things! Some political campaign consultants advise candidates to go negative early, suggesting that it is a large advantage to be able to define your opponent before they can craft their own narrative (Peterson & Djupe, 2005, p. 45). Others say only do it when necessary—when the polls are close, or the candidate is behind. As one Democratic strategist noted:

“The marketplace dictates the tone. Voters’ concerns and reactions to negative ads have evolved over the past two decades and, accordingly, political professionals have adapted. For example, the days of running grainy ads with ominous music are over; voters simply quit believing anything with overtones that

negative. Also, voters quit responding to negative charges that were not fully supported by third-party validation such as a newspaper article or a study. So, the industry has lightened the tone of attacks and added footnotes and fine print.”
(Strother, 2019)

While we may be tempted to dismiss attacks ads as bad for democracy, it is important to remember that often, they are comparative. Strategists say that a candidate has to point out the negative things about their opponent because the opponent, who wants to win, has incentives to hide damning information. So, attack ads provide information that otherwise might not get publicity. So, do negative campaign ads work? Despite a host of scholarly research, it is really tough to say! It does seem to be the case that negative ads are more memorable than positive ones (Floyd, 2016), but that does not necessarily translate into an increase in voter turnout or voter choice. It seems as though the effect of negative campaigning is rather short lived (Green, 2013).

One characteristic of character assassination in a democracy, however, is that the resources to respond are relatively evenly distributed throughout society. We have already noted that differences in resources, power, and access to the media varies when considering the targets of attacks. Certainly, these differences matter. But compare democracies with a relatively open and free press and with scant restrictions on online discourse to places like China and Russia, where most of the media is state controlled. If a political candidate in the United States or Western Europe is the target of an attack ad, they can call together their media team, create an ad that hits back, and buy media time to air it. In fact, U.S. law requires that television networks provide equal opportunity to bona fide candidates for political office to buy airtime!

This chapter has identified the significance of character assassination in democratic government. We have explored some of the key characteristics of democracies. We have seen the importance of concepts like trustworthiness and authenticity in helping influence an electorate, which, in a democracy, has a powerful role to play in politics. We have also noted the ways that the media can feed character assassination by focusing on horse-race coverage as candidates weigh decisions about whether or not to go negative against others. But the key thing to take away from this chapter is that in democratic systems with the freedom of the press and with the need of politicians to be transparent and accountable for their actions before their electorate, targets of character attacks should expect that they have time and resources to launch their defenses and responses. In non-democratic societies, the rules of political communication are much different.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- In general terms, democracy is a form of government that relies on the consent of the governed. There are many forms of democracy and many ways in which character attacks can be launched and defended against within them.
- Although this may be changing, most people prefer to elect someone to govern them who they trust to represent their interest and who they trust to be a good person. It is very difficult to determine what exactly a good character entails for politicians, but at least in the United States, two interconnected traits, authenticity and trustworthiness, seem to be central.

- Authenticity is a “double-edged sword” that may promote stereotypes about authenticity related to gender, religion, or race.
- Because impressions of character are often central to how people make decisions about who to vote for in representative democracies, character becomes an important avenue of attack from political or ideological opponents.
- Character attacks do not necessarily and always discourage people to vote for a candidate or to support somebody. By attacking the opponent, you rather mobilize your own uncommitted base. These are known as “toothpaste tactics.”
- In democracies, horse race coverage of elections is common. It defines politics as a game, and talks about campaigning in the metaphor of sports, seeking evidence that, like in a horse race, one candidate has nudged slightly ahead of another. In shifting attention away from issues and toward ethereal opinion polls, this type of coverage increases the significance of journalist-produced impressions of authenticity and character.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. The play described in the beginning of the chapter emphasizes Paphlagon/Cleon’s boorish manners as a manipulator and speech maker. Yet do you think that politicians who behave as manipulators remain authentic? Can “bad” authenticity be an asset for a public figure?
2. Do you think horse race campaign coverage of elections gives advantage to politicians who launch character attacks against their opponents?
3. How can a democratic politician (like you, for example) best convince the public that they are authentic and thus electable as candidates?
4. Provide an example of a character attack, in which a person is targeted for his or her lack of authenticity.
5. How would you value the role of character attacks, in a democratic society? Are they a negative feature we should try to get rid of, a necessary evil, or do they have a positive contribution to make in a well-functioning democracy?

KEY TERMS

Authenticity A political character that entails honesty, integrity, and transparency.

Democracy A form of government that relies on the consent of the governed.

Direct democracy A political system in which people decide on various initiatives openly and directly.

Horse race coverage Media coverage of elections that focuses solely on who is winning or losing based on particular opinion polls.

Representative democracy A political system in which elected individuals represent groups of people.

Toothpaste tube theory The theory stating that there will always be an outcome from persistent pressure, just as when we squeeze a toothpaste tube, something will come out.

Trustworthiness The quality of being viewed as reliable, honest, and dependable.

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Character Assassination in Authoritarian Regimes

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain the mutual relationship among character assassination, information, and autocracy.
- Critically discuss how authoritarian governments and autocratic rulers throughout the ages used character assassination to achieve their political and personal goals.
- Explain the opportunities and challenges essential to studying character assassination in authoritarian political systems.
- Suggest recommendations about the application of studies into character assassination to better understand past and present political regimes and leaders.

Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, has cultivated the image of a benign, caring leader, branding himself to the Chinese people as “Uncle Xi.” He was not amused when memes started circulating online comparing him to Winnie the Pooh, the friendly teddy and funny bear character created by novelist A.A. Milne and popularized in Disney cartoons. The first of these memes appeared in 2013. It juxtaposed a picture of President Xi walking alongside U.S. President Obama with a drawing of the Disney characters Winnie the Pooh and Tigger walking together—obviously poking fun at Xi's stocky build next to Obama's slender frame. Other memes comparing Xi to the fictional bear would soon follow (Haas, 2018). They were not necessarily meant to mock the Chinese president. Given Pooh's sweet nature, it is possible that the images were shared by Chinese people to express their affection for “Uncle Xi” in a lighthearted way. However, that was not the view taken by the regime. According to the website *Global Risk Insights*, the Chinese government regarded the Pooh memes as “a serious effort to undermine the dignity of the presidential office and Xi himself” (Luedi, 2016). The government took measures to put a stop to the online trend. Chinese websites censored images of Pooh and the teddy bear's name no longer rendered

any results in Chinese search engines. In fact, China's most censored picture of 2015 was apparently an image of Xi standing upright in a car during a military parade, juxtaposed with an image of Pooh driving a toy car (Haas, 2018; Luedi, 2016).

This case shows how intolerant autocratic leaders can be about any perceived slights to their public image, regardless of how trivial these snubs may appear. It also shows the enormous resources at the disposal of authoritarian regimes to combat perceived character attacks.

ON AUTHORITARIANISM

A political system in which individual freedom is subordinate to the power or authority of the state is called **authoritarianism**. Political leaders in authoritarian governments typically rely on a relatively small inner circle and impose their decisions on the population. They also use bureaucratic institutions to impose their policies. Such institutions under authoritarian power typically lack transparency and accountability. As you should remember from Chapter 10, democracy is a dynamic continuum, and no democratic society resembles another, neither in history nor today. Similarly, authoritarianism is not a dichotomy (i.e. a society is either authoritarian or it is not). It is a continuum, so that some countries or political systems can actually be more authoritarian than others. Authoritarianism also evolves over time and a country can become either more or less authoritarian. South Korea, for example, over the past four decades has gradually replaced its authoritarian institutions and policies with more democratic ones. Russia, on the contrary, in the 21st century is becoming increasingly authoritarian after a period of relative democratization.

Authoritarianism, despite its variety of forms, has several common features relevant to our study of reputation and character attacks. To begin, authoritarian governments usually weaken or even ban viable opposition parties and groups. The People's Republic of China, for example, bans all political parties, except the ruling one. Other governments, like Russia, allow political parties but do not let them gain power. Authoritarianism is also hostile to transparent and free elections. Although authoritarian governments allow elections these days, they are hardly transparent and certainly unfree because of the government's control of the media, intimidation of the opposition, and interference in the electoral process. Authoritarian governments limit criticism coming from oppositional voices, yet they facilitate social and political groups in support of the regime. Authoritarian governments do not allow independent court systems and limit people's major civil rights, like the right to speak, for promises of stability and security. Moreover, authoritarianism—and this is especially important for our discussion—does not tolerate independent media.

Everything printed, broadcast, or streamed can be censored if it depicts the ruling few in a negative light. We saw this in the opening example. The “firewall” surrounding the Internet in China is a profound illustration of an authoritarian government's interference in modern technology for political reasons. In democratic societies, private newspapers, magazines, radio and television networks contribute to the competitive political process and transparent elections, in particular. At the same time, free mass media and social networks provide an unprecedented opportunity for competing

political parties, groups, and private individuals to launch character attacks against their political opponents, or anyone else they choose. Furthermore, legal rules in democracies guarantee freedom of speech, thus safeguarding most of the words and images conveyed through print and broadcast media. However, the law also protects individuals from libel, which is, as you remember, a deliberate false statement that is damaging to a person's reputation.

In authoritarian systems, speaking simply, governing political establishments create two systems of rules: one for themselves and the other one for the rest of society. Mass media, social networks, and other forms of mass communication in such systems are under the government's control, which decides what information is allowed to be posted or broadcast (this function of the government is called "gatekeeping") and how to interpret information (this is called "framing," which we discussed in Chapter 6). In other words, public discussions, criticisms, and character attacks in the media are usually allowed yet they are heavily regulated to benefit the government.

Autocracy is somewhat different from authoritarianism. Autocracy stands for a political system in which a sole person or a small group of people possess most political power and impose their will on others within a country's political, social, or economic spheres. Autocratic leaders and their governments tend to be profoundly intolerant toward criticisms. Although authoritarianism and autocracy have several characteristics in common, it is important to make a distinction between them. For example, in authoritarian systems, top leaders are in most cases expected to be autocratic because they are the instruments of authoritarian power. However, a democratic leader can appear and even survive in an authoritarian system. Mikhail Gorbachev (b. 1931), former President of the Soviet Union, emerged in 1985 as a leader within an authoritarian communist system. Yet Gorbachev was among the least autocratic leaders in the country's history. His personal style included collegiality and openness to criticisms (and even character attacks, which was impossible with his predecessors). On the other hand, President of France Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970) was an autocratic leader within the democratic system of the French Republic, the laws of which also allowed people's critical views of the president.

Again, although these terms are often mixed together and their use can sometimes be confusing, for the sake of our book we will reserve the term *authoritarian* to refer to the system, and the term *autocratic* to describe individuals.

ON CHARACTER IN THE CONTEXT OF AUTHORITARIANISM

Authoritarianism tends to embrace autocratic leadership, and autocratic leaders thrive in authoritarian systems. Individual character features of political leaders thus become obvious targets of attacks from foreign and domestic critics. For instance, in 2016 the German comedian Jan Böhmermann caused an international incident through a poem mocking Turkish President Recep Erdoğan as a violent oppressor with deviant sexual tastes (BBC, 2016). The leader's individual characteristics appear to play a more significant role in authoritarian than in democratic (nonauthoritarian) political systems. It seems this way because in democracy, most political decisions are institutionalized

and restrained by the free media and the government system of checks and balances rooted in separation of powers. An U.S. president or Dutch prime minister may not take, for example, ten million dollars or euros from the state budget and give it to some business associate even for a good cause. Likewise, political leaders in democracy may not “shake down” businesses and demand “donations” from them in exchange for political or other favors. Leaders in authoritarian regimes commit these and similar acts often, often surreptitiously, but sometimes openly.

LET'S DISCUSS

Can autocratic individuals be more prone to launching character attacks compared to non-autocrats? Are there also people who eagerly support autocrats and gladly join smear campaigns against their opponents—the campaigns that autocratic leaders initiate or support? The answer is yes. Political psychologists have long adopted the term **authoritarian personality**. It is a complex pattern of behavior, emotion, and thought based on the individual's faithful acceptance of the power of authority, order, and subordination (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Discussions about authoritarian personality drew significant attention and sparked research on this subject for many years (Marasco, 2018). The type of people whom we call “authoritarian personalities” are prone to mystical thinking and prejudice against ethnic and religious minorities, the LGBTQ community, and most kinds of social innovations. People with strong authoritarian personality traits tend to be obedient to authority figures, such as parents (especially fathers), teachers, and autocratic political leaders. These individuals are prone to intolerance and anger. The authoritarian personality type also presents a cynical and disdainful view of humanity, and a need to project power and be tough against those who violate, in their view, the “correct” values and behavior (Adorno et al., 1950; Duckitt, 2013).

One of the most remarkable findings of studies of the authoritarian personality is that such a type is relatively common in ordinary people. They tend to endorse authoritarian methods of government and enthusiastically support dictators. At the same time, they are eager to go after and destroy the reputations of those with whom they disagree or whose behavior they simply do not like.

Could you argue in support or against the assumption—which has not been empirically tested yet—that the “authoritarian personality” type (see again this type's features) is likely to support character attacks against people who do not “fit” into this personality's perceived world of “correct” and “appropriate” values and actions? Please provide one or more examples to support your argument.

Leaders in authoritarian systems tend to be less concerned about public opinion than leaders in democracies. After all, the former (at least most of them) do not have to worry about winning elections. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the case of President Xi, leaders in authoritarian countries often make great efforts to maintain a positive image of their character in the eyes of the public. Even the most powerful autocrat is vulnerable to peer pressure from financial backers, members of the inner circle, or supporting political elites. An autocrat may also face military coups and popular uprisings. When the autocratic leader loses the support of political and military elites, his reign can soon be over. Therefore, many authoritarian regimes have built personality cults around their leaders. A **personality cult** is a system of informal practices and formal policies to deliberately present a leader as having exceptionally positive qualities. The “good character” of the leader is advertised far and wide to generate loyalty, admiration, and respect. The opposition, of course, questions and attacks such “good characters” using all means available to them despite censorship. In short, personality cults, just by their nature, tend to create a favorable environment for character attacks.

In the Roman Empire, the emperor’s portrait was omnipresent in every city and army camp, especially in Rome itself. As the 2nd-century scholar Fronto wrote to his pupil Marcus Aurelius, the appointed successor of the reigning emperor, “you know that in all the banks, booths, shops and taverns, gables, porches and windows, anywhere and everywhere, there are portraits of you exposed to public view” (*To Marcus as Caesar* 4.12.6; quoted in Elsner, 1998, p. 54). Many people worshipped the emperor as a living god, making sacrifices to show their loyalty and curry his favor. After his death, the divine status of a popular ruler was confirmed through an official decree by the Roman Senate, which declared him *divus* (“deified”) and arranged for temples to be built in his honor. The same was true for empresses. At the Forum Romanum in Rome, you can still see the remains of the Temple of Emperor Antoninus Pius and Empress Faustina (which was later converted in the Chiesa di San Lorenzo in Miranda Church).

Both the imperial regime and the Roman people conspired to create an image of the emperor as the perfect man embodying all virtues, from courage and clemency to justice and piety. When we look at imperial statues, it is striking how much emphasis they place on the ruler’s masculine qualities. Like the gods and heroes of Greco-Roman mythology, emperors were frequently depicted naked, displaying beautiful, muscular bodies. This even applies to rulers who were already quite advanced in years. One statue shows the wrinkled head of Vespasian, who was about sixty when he came to power, attached to the brawny physique of a heroic nude. Apparently, nobody batted an eye at such contrasts!

Similar patterns continued in more recent times. Ideological authoritarianism is rooted in a specific doctrine, or a system of beliefs, values, or teachings that prescribe a particular pattern of behavior. Therefore, it appears that people’s characters in ideology-driven authoritarian systems (communism, Nazism, and fascism for example) were supposed to “fit” particular standards referring to physical strength, moral purity, fortitude, purity of thought, etc. It also looks like ideological authoritarianism has always been connected with endorsement of masculinity in men (often associated with physical strength, decisiveness, firm discipline, hardness, etc.) and femininity in women

(as associated with kindness, agreeableness, loyalty, nurturing traits, etc.). Although Nazism and communism often encouraged supposedly masculine traits and behaviors in women (such as being tough, pursuing typical male-assigned jobs such as firefighting, brick laying, etc.), they almost never allowed males to develop traits regarded as “feminine.” If this was the case, the individual was usually mocked, and character attacked as effeminate. As a modern parallel, pictures of Russian President Putin walking bare-chested through Siberia’s wilderness, riding a horse, flying a jet, playing hockey, drinking beer, wrestling down a sparring-partner, or scuba diving were all supposed to convey the image of a “macho man.”

Sure, these images gave plenty of chances for the opposition and other critics to attack such attempts as staged and pretentious. To them, Putin did not appear as authentic, a trait that is very important for the leader’s reputation (discussed in Chapter 10). Critics also portrayed Putin, because of such pictures, as a narcissist, or a person who is too focused on his own handsomeness and obsessed with his own good image (ABC News, 2018).

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Autocratic leaders in authoritarian systems have a wide range of actions available to them to weaken and even eliminate their opponents without facing many, if any, legal or political obstacles. However, their power is not limitless. Besides, most leaders care about the legitimacy of their actions. Therefore, character attacks often become effective tools of their politics. Such attacks can directly target certain individuals. They can be launched by the means of silencing and censorship. They also can be organized in the form of show trials and other public events designed to blame and shame the opponent (see Table 11.1).

ORGANIZED DIRECT ATTACKS

Authoritarian methods of character attacks share many similar characteristics across countries and times. A character assassination attempt begins “from above”: there should be someone in government circles who gives a go for an attack. Such a trigger can be an official government decision followed by a public speech or a newspaper publication to encourage or explain that decision. Next, some designated government leaders or bureaucrats—chief character assassins—launch more substantial and detailed attacks. They exaggerate facts, falsify information, and smear the reputation of their targets according to formal or unofficial instructions they have received. Then the attacks emerge in the politically controlled press—typically, in newspaper editorials, television news, in major headlines. Then the entire country is supposed to mobilize to support the publications and to condemn the apparent “villain” (which many people actually do). Unfortunately, those who find themselves under attacks usually have little or no opportunity to defend themselves because they either have no access to the media or, if they do, lack authority to generate a credible self-defense.

TABLE 11.1 Types of character attacks in authoritarian systems

Types of Attacks	Description of Attacks	Goal of Attacks
Organized direct attacks	Organized and controlled attacks initiated by authorities who exaggerate and fabricate facts, falsify, and smear the reputation of their targets.	To mobilize public opinion in a joint condemnation or rejection of the “villain” (the target of the attacks).
Censorship and silencing	Organized practice of isolating, muting, and virtually eliminating a person’s ability to participate in public discussions.	To restrict the target’s access to the audience; to eliminate an opportunity for the person to explain or defend himself or herself.
Scapegoating	Deliberate actions and statements unfairly singling out and blaming a person or group for their alleged behavior and certain negative outcomes of such behavior.	To mobilize public opinion and offer people a seemingly plausible explanation of a negative event or allow them to release their anger and vent frustration against the scapegoat.
Show trials	Public court hearings or similar legal procedures in which government authorities have already established the guilt of the accused.	To use the legal venue in legitimizing character attacks against the target. To warn or intimidate some individuals opposing government policies and to encourage government supporters.

Authoritarian political systems have successfully used character assassination as a policy tool. Leaders could directly benefit from such attacks, which can weaken and disarm their opponents morally and psychologically. Moreover, these attacks can mobilize public opinion to rally around the establishment and to scapegoat the target of attacks. Next, the physical elimination of the opponent becomes easier to accomplish. A teachable example is the case of Leon Trotsky (1879–1940; see Image 11.1), a prominent politician in communist Russia, who was often considered the second most powerful party and government official in the country. In the 1920s, he led the Left Opposition within the Communist Party, a faction which resisted the growing power of an increasingly autocratic Joseph Stalin. However, as Stalin consolidated his position on top of the hierarchy, he launched a highly effective character assassination campaign against Trotsky, branding him as a “traitor” and an “enemy of the revolution.” Communist newspapers published harshly critical articles about Trotsky. He lost his political power and then his membership in the Communist Party. He was later expelled from the Soviet Union altogether. Trotsky kept opposing Stalin from his new-found home in Mexico. In Soviet propaganda, he was for years used as a convenient target of printed attacks who was supposedly responsible for all the economic difficulties, social problems, and even secret plots to overthrow the ruling regime (Samoilenko & Karnysheva, 2020). Eventually, Stalin had him physically assassinated in 1940 by a secret agent.



IMAGE 11.1 Stalin's rival Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Union and became a national scapegoat. Eventually Stalin had him murdered

Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-B2-1234

CENSORSHIP AND SILENCING

In the 20th century, fascist governments in Italy and Spain, the Nazi government in Germany, or communist governments such as China and the Soviet Union, used the advancements of communication technologies as a unique opportunity to control information in their countries by means of **censorship**, which is the restrictive practice of reviewing and determining what is allowed to be published or broadcast. Returning to the earlier case, the Soviet government prohibited the uncritical use of Trotsky's name in all printed publications. For decades, history textbooks totally ignored his accomplishments and focused on his alleged traitorous features and actions. In all communist countries in the past century, authoritarian governments sanctioned and organized silencing campaigns against many prominent individuals. When the Czechoslovakian playwright Václav Havel (whose case first appears in Chapter 1) began opposing the appalling human rights track record of his country's communist government in the 1970s and 80s, his publications in his own country were prohibited. He was not allowed to defend himself publicly. He became a constant target for character attacks in the official press. He was ridiculed as a puppet of the West, a liar, a sellout, an untalented writer, and a greedy and corrupted man. However, these attacks backfired. The communist government in the 1980s had already lost its trustworthy reputation in the eyes of the public and the official smear campaign

only strengthened Havel's favorable image in the eyes of the Czechoslovakian people (Klicperová-Baker, 2014).

This case shows that a changing political climate can eventually undermine censorship and become a serious threat to authoritarian political regimes. If authorities lose their grip on information, if they lose the trust of most people, they subsequently lose their ability to launch successful character attacks against their political enemies. The case of Havel illustrates this development well. It also shows that many individuals could become complacent with the ongoing character assassination of a prominent individual so long as a legitimate authority sanctions this action, and as far as they, by not condemning the attack, achieve certain individual gains, including job security or peer approval.

SCAPEGOATING

By portraying an individual's character in a very negative light, an attacker makes it easy to put the blame on that person for business mistakes, social problems, or policy failures. This practice is called **scapegoating**, or unfairly singling out and blaming a person or group for their alleged actions or certain negative outcomes. Scapegoating is a common strategy in character attacks. Scapegoating can serve a function of social mobilization in an authoritarian state. The government via controlled media sends people a message that certain identifiable "villains" are causing problems and thus should be punished. Many people thus release their anger and vent frustration against the scapegoat. The "traitor" Trotsky fulfilled this role in Stalin's regime, but he was not the only one. Let's look at another example.

In the Soviet Union, in 1946, the Communist Party issued an official directive regarding two literary journals published in Moscow and St. Petersburg. (Historically, in communist countries such as China or the Soviet Union, such directives contained a general description of an apparent social or political problem and then somewhat vague hints regarding proposed actions to address the problem.) The 1946 directive stated that the poetry and prose published in these journals was too pro-Western and uncritical toward "bourgeois" moral values rooted in consumerism, greed, moral degradation, and corruption. One may wonder today, why the Communist Party of a country that was going through a period of enormous economic difficulties and starvation after World War II would issue a directive about the style of publications in two relatively obscure literary journals. In fact, the party directive was a signal to local party organizations to start a nation-wide scapegoating campaign against so-called "cosmopolitans" (as they were labeled in newspapers), i.e. the people who had allegedly lost their sense of patriotism and pride for their government.

This campaign resulted in the direct orders to educational and research institutions to stop or limit using Western scientific sources. Journals such as *Science* and *Nature* were removed from public libraries, and most plays or operas by European authors were removed from theater repertoires. This campaign continued through the 1940s and later. What is the most important for our discussion is that these government actions were also closely connected and coordinated with an organized smear

campaign against prominent Soviet professionals, artists, doctors, and engineers of Jewish identity. Stalin grew increasingly suspicious of Soviet Jews and his mistrust, almost a paranoid obsession, most probably resulted in his antisemitic actions. In secret memoranda, the Communist Party would recommend the local organizations to use the label “cosmopolitan” to single out certain individuals of Jewish identity and launch public criticisms against them: they had to be accused of being unpatriotic and morally decrepit (Fateev, 1999). Many prominent Jewish individuals were fired from their jobs or transferred to obscure positions. Some were arrested and jailed.

SHOW TRIALS

Authoritarian regimes have a long tradition of **show trials**. These are public tribunals in which authorities have already established the guilt of the accused. The purpose of such trials is to make an impact on public opinion, to warn or intimidate some individuals opposing government policies, and to encourage government supporters. Show trials serve as almost a perfect ground for character attacks against an opponent.

In Nazi Germany, a special People’s Court was established to deal with political offenses, especially treason. The court was notorious because the judges verbally abused the accused, gave them very limited means to defend themselves, and very often issued a death sentence. Whether there was any evidence against the people who were brought to trial was a secondary consideration at best—the point of the People’s Court was that enemies of the Nazi regime were removed and made examples of (Wachsmann, 2004). Among its most well-known victims was Sophie Scholl (1921–1943), a German student who had joined a non-violent resistance movement and was arrested for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets at the University of Munich. At age 21, she was executed by guillotine. “Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go,” she is alleged to have said, “but what does my death matter, if through us thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?” Nowadays, many German schools are named in her honor (Newborn, 2006).

One of the most vivid examples of character assassination through show trials comes from China. The case is known as the Gao-Rao affair (Shiraev & Yang, 2014). The history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is closely interwoven with the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The party has been a political force inseparable from the People’s Republic. Four generations of leadership came and went after the party’s ascendance to power in 1949. Underneath the seemingly calm transition of power, the CCP was constantly in a state of inner competition and struggle among individuals and groups. This competition for power was fierce and often brutal. The losers gave up their official party post, or, sometimes, their freedom and lives. To emerge victorious in these conflicts, one had to possess the “sharpest weapons,” including the ability to control the opinions and decisions of the party leaders. Character assassination was frequently chosen as such a weapon.

The Gao Gang-Rao Shushi Affair, officially known as the Gao Gang-Rao Shushi Incident or Gao Gang-Rao Shushi Anti-Party Alliance, was the first major purge within the party since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The

two main protagonists of this incident, Gao Gang and Rao Shushi, were at the time top leaders in the party hierarchy. The two men once had promising and successful careers. However, for several reasons, Chinese leader Mao grew increasingly weary of their success and growing prominence. The demise and fall of these individuals was hard and painful. In a series of party meetings and in several documents, they were accused of “bourgeois individualism, negligence, and careerism” among other “sins” and personal transgressions. Gao, for example, was accused of “Ten Cardinal Crimes.” They included: disseminating false outlooks on the Party’s history and its current state of affairs, engagement in sectarian activities aimed against the leading comrades of the Party’s Central Committee, sowing intra-Party discord through the means of rumor-mongering, cronyism, treating the area under his leadership as his personal property, plagiarizing the works of others, falsely using the name of the Central Committee to cause damage to its prestige, causing disunity in Sino-Soviet relations by leaking sensitive party information to Soviet counterparts, conspiring to seize Party and State power, and practicing a degenerate lifestyle. The discussion of Gao’s “transgressions” was public.

Rao Shushi was also under a serious character attack in front of his old colleagues and key members of the decision-making echelon of the CCP. Rao’s alleged character flaws were tied to his supposed plot to usurp the party’s supreme leadership. This was also a convenient way to expose the alleged “Gao-Rao anti-party clique” (in Chinese politics after 1949, “criminals” tended to come in “cliques” rather than as individuals). By highlighting Rao’s mistakes through character assassination and cornering him to capitulate and turn to self-criticism, the party’s top leadership reached their goal of eliminating the alleged opposition, and then justifying their actions in the eyes of the party members.

In communist countries show trials have also occurred in the form of local “public” show trials or public “shaming” campaigns (Stephenson, 2021). In the Soviet Union, for example, many such “honor trials” were held at the end of the 1940s and later to deal with the threat of “cosmopolitanism,” which was discussed earlier in the chapter. Short of pursuing criminal prosecution, the government launched a campaign of public shaming of individuals who it accused of being too sympathetic to the West, being uncritical about Western science, or too negligent about letting Western sources influence their research or creative work. The targets of character attacks during the “honor trials” were artists, musicians, architects, scientists, teachers, professors, doctors, and other educated individuals. To communicate any positive assessments of capitalism as a social and political system—i.e. to like jazz, abstract art, Hollywood films, to study psychoanalysis or Western sociology—was considered a serious character flaw and even a cause of legal actions against such individuals.

AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS AS TARGETS

Since autocratic leaders are often the focus of personality cults, they tend to have a strong presence in the public sphere in the form of statues, monuments, and billboards. A classic (though fictional) case is Big Brother in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (published in 1949), which gives a bleak view of a totalitarian

society where everyone is under constant state surveillance. In the city where the protagonist Winston lives,

there seemed to be no colour in anything, except the posters that were plastered everywhere. The black-moustachio'd face gazed down from every commanding corner. There was one on the house-front immediately opposite. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own.

(Orwell, 1989, p. 4)

Not surprisingly, critics and opponents often vandalize such omnipresent symbols of a leader's power. If the leader is firmly entrenched, this tends to happen secretly, often at night. After the Roman emperor Nero had commanded the murder of his own mother Agrippina, for instance, an anonymous citizen tied a sack to the neck of one of the ruler's statues, referencing the traditional punishment that a parricide should be sewn in a sack with vicious animals and thrown into the sea (Kellum, 2015, p. 424). At other times, the death of a dictator triggers furious attacks on his images. The ancient Roman author Pliny the Younger describes such a reaction after the tyrannical emperor Domitian had been assassinated in 96 CE:

It was our delight to dash those proud faces to the ground, to smite them with the sword and savage them with the axe, as if blood and agony could follow from every blow. Our transports of joy—so long deferred—were unrestrained; all sought a form of vengeance in beholding those bodies mutilated, limbs hacked in pieces, and finally that baleful, fearsome visage cast into fire, to be melted down, so that from such menacing terror something for man's use and enjoyment should rise out of the flames.

(*Panegyric* 52.4–5; Pliny the Younger, 1969)

In a grislier variation on this theme, it is not the leader's statues, but his actual living or dead body that is tortured and mutilated. Such was the fate of the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi (1969–2011) after his regime had been toppled, and he, while attempting to flee, fell into the hands of a belligerent group of rebels.

Vandalizing or removing statues of autocratic leaders does not always happen in an uncontrolled, emotionally driven frenzy. It is also possible for a new regime to dispense with the images of a previous leader in a well-organized, systematic manner. After Stalin died in 1953, his successors began a process of “de-Stalinization” in the Soviet Union. His statues were removed from public places, and streets and buildings which had been named in his honor received new names. In 1961, Stalin's body was removed from the Mausoleum in the Red Square, where it had been for a few years interred with Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Union. In the same year, the city of Stalin-grad was renamed Volgograd. As discussed in Chapter 5, all these actions are examples of *disgracing*: they posthumously took away Stalin's prestige by reversing the process through which the Soviet leader had glorified himself.

The personality cults that many autocratic leaders build around themselves also make them vulnerable to another form of known character attack: *ridicule*. We have already

seen how Xi Jinping responded hostilely to memes associating him with Winnie the Pooh. Mocking autocratic leaders is often most effective when poking fun at “sore spots” that the regime would rather gloss over, such as a painful military defeat or human rights abuses. Another effective tactic is to target conspicuous glorifying elements of a leader’s personality cult and turn them upside down to expose grand claims as a lot of hot air.

As an example, let’s look at King Louis XIV of France (1638–1715; see Image 11.2), also known as the Sun King. His control over the French government was so absolute that he could confidently and famously announce “L’état, c’est moi” (“The state, that’s me”). Few monarchs in world history have been graced with a more splendid royal image. Louis spent much of his time at the Palace of Versailles near Paris, a residence



IMAGE 11.2 Louis XIV of France, portrayed in his splendor as the “Sun King” (1701)
Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

of enormous size and unrivalled opulence. There, amidst the gleaming gold, gems, and mirrored halls of the royal court, he and his nobility lived a life filled with lavish balls and banquets. Louis's whole decades-long reign can be seen as one big theatrical performance meant to dazzle the spectators, with the king playing the radiant leading role of the sun god Apollo (Burke, 1992; Elias, 1969).



IMAGE 11.3 This Dutch mocking image portrays Louis as Phaeton, the overconfident youth from Greek mythology who failed to steer the chariot of the sun and paid with his life

Source: Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Public Domain

Such a pompous personality cult inevitably became a target for character attacks. Many printed pamphlets against Louis appeared. These originated from French dissidents as well as from critics in rivalling nations like England and the Dutch Republic. They mocked Louis for his mistresses and secret second marriage. They portrayed him not as Apollo but as Phaeton, the overconfident young man from Greco-Roman mythology who tried to steer the chariot of the sun but lost control, crashed, and burned to a crisp (see Image 11.3). The Swiss artist Joseph Werner, who had worked for Louis in his younger years but was then in the service of a German patron, painted a spoof of the king's elaborate banquets, depicting him as a beast-like satyr presiding over an undignified orgy. In short, every effort was made to deflate the exalted image of the Sun King through relentless mockery (Burke, 1992, pp. 135–149).

However, attacking the character of an autocratic leader is not without danger. If it is done openly, the attacker runs a very real risk of ending up in jail if not worse. Censorship is a powerful weapon that autocratic leaders use to control their images, forcing their critics to go underground or to flee to other countries. In addition, some of these leaders are actually very beloved by large parts of their population, so mocking or criticizing them can have a significant backlash effect. Many contemporary Russians do not see Putin as a corrupt dictator, but as a strong leader who has improved Russia's stature in the world and do not take to it kindly when this positive image is called into question.

As you can see, in authoritarian countries, character attacks against individuals or leaders who fall into disfavor by the country's top leadership are encouraged and even amplified by the political system. The institutions, the laws, and the supporting system bureaucracies and political elites can all amplify elites' attacks. Often such attacks are launched by ordinary people against selected targets to please the authorities and earn benefits. The targets of the attacks are typically accused of various character flaws and alleged to have conducted awful, immoral acts (often fabricated). Most individuals living in authoritarian states apparently have little choice but to join the smear campaign: if they dare to disagree or protest, the authorities have many legal and political means to retaliate against the dissenting.

So far, we have discussed the events and cases unfolding mostly within a country's borders. Can character attacks cross international borders? This will be the main theme of the next chapter.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- In authoritarian systems, political leaders typically rely on a relatively small inner circle and impose their decisions on the population. They also use bureaucratic institutions to impose their policies.
- Autocracy stands for a political system in which a sole person or a small group of people possess most political power and impose their will on others within a country's political, social, or economic spheres. Autocratic leaders and their governments tend to be intolerant toward criticisms.
- Many authoritarian regimes build personality cults around their leaders, or a system of informal practices and formal policies to deliberately present a leader of a

country or an organization as having exceptionally positive qualities. The “good character” of the leader is advertised far and wide to generate loyalty, admiration, and respect.

- Because ideological authoritarianism is rooted in a specific doctrine, individual characters in ideology-driven authoritarian systems such as communism and fascism are supposed to “fit” particular standards referring to their body, mind, and behavior.
- Character attacks are effective tools of authoritarian politics. Such attacks can directly target certain individuals. They can be launched by the means of silencing and censorship. They also can be organized in the form of show trials and other public events designed to “scapegoat” or blame and shame the opponent.
- Because autocratic leaders are often the focus of personality cults, they tend to have a strong presence in the public sphere in the form of statues, monuments, and billboards. Not surprisingly, critics and opponents often vandalize such omnipresent symbols of a leader’s power. It is also possible for a new regime to dispense with the images of a previous leader in a well-organized, systematic manner.
- In authoritarian countries, character attacks against individuals or leaders who fall into disfavor of the country’s top leadership are encouraged and even amplified by the political system.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Why do authoritarian political systems often become fertile grounds (including their institutions and mass media) for launching character attacks against particular individuals?
2. How can political censorship in the media encourage or discourage character attacks? Suggest a few examples.
3. Can the “authoritarian personality” type of individual exist and even thrive in democracy? Consider situations and cases, real or hypothetical, when an individual’s intolerance and prejudice toward other people’s views can contribute to a successful character attack against individuals with different opinions.
4. Why should the advisers of Chinese President Xi Jinping worry about online caricatures comparing him to Winnie the Pooh? Even though we do not know their logic exactly, how would you explain their negative reaction to such caricatures? What are they afraid of?
5. As you have learned in this chapter, authoritarian regimes have a long tradition of show trials. These are public tribunals in which authorities have already established the guilt of the accused. How should people in democracies protect themselves from the threat of such “show trials” in the press or social networks?
6. Scapegoating is unfairly singling out and blaming a person for his or her alleged actions or certain negative outcomes. Could you suggest and discuss three examples of scapegoating in today’s society? What common features do they share?

KEY TERMS

- Authoritarian personality** A complex pattern of behavior and thought based on the individual's faithful acceptance of the power of authority, order, and subordination.
- Authoritarianism** A political system in which individual freedom is subordinate to the power or authority of the state.
- Autocracy** A political system in which a sole person or a small group of people possesses most political power and imposes their will on others within a country's political, social, or economic spheres.
- Censorship** The restrictive practice of reviewing and determining what is allowed to be published or broadcast.
- Personality cult** A system of informal practices and formal policies to deliberately present a leader of a country or an organization as having exceptionally positive qualities.
- Scapegoating** Singling out and blaming a person or group for their alleged actions or certain negative outcomes.
- Show trials** Public tribunals in which authorities have already established the guilt of the accused.

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Character Assassination in International Relations

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe character assassination as a phenomenon in international relations.
- Critically discuss how political and technological developments shaped practices of character assassination in diplomacy.
- Explain the opportunities and challenges inherent to studying character assassination in modern international politics.
- Apply studies into character assassination to modern international politics.

Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev did not like each other. Despite being leaders of the two largest communist countries in the world, despite both claiming unbreakable loyalty to communist ideology, these two men clashed for global leadership. This struggle in the second half of the 1950s was strategic, ideological, political, and cultural. Most importantly for our case, this clash was clearly personal. Over several years, the Chinese leader increasingly irritated Khrushchev. In his eyes, Mao was ungrateful, arrogant, and stubborn. The Soviet leader annoyed Mao for seemingly being shifty, flamboyant, and shallow. Personal meetings between Mao and Khrushchev were few. Yet during inner-circle consultations with their own countrymen, both leaders did not hesitate to call each other bad names, according to close associates (Shepilov, 2017). Imprecise translations did not help either. Once, during a heated debate with some Chinese officials Khrushchev called Mao, who was absent, an “old galosh,” which in Chinese means “an old boot” but also “a prostitute.” The Chinese eyewitness later translated that Khrushchev had allegedly called Mao a “whore” (Delusin, 1998; Mochulski, 1998). Mao was furious. So was Khrushchev, who publicly mocked Chinese leadership for them “having no pants” (being abject poor) but dreaming of communism (the society of plenty). Mao responded in kind. He publicly accused Khrushchev of being a liar, two-faced, and pathetic (Mao, 1963). The “revisionist” label was permanently attached to the Soviet leader. Organized media campaigns of insults and name-calling in both countries followed (Ningkun, 1998).

Do other countries' leaders personally insult each other, like Mao and Khrushchev did? They do as evidenced by multiple online headlines. For example, North Korean top officials during the last two decades commonly used harsh and insulting language to attack South Korean, Japanese, American, and other leaders. In 2016, the president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, called Barack Obama the "son of a whore." In 2017, the presidents of Ukraine and Russia exchanged online "jabs" using mockery about being "corrupt" or "unclean" and other ethnic stereotypes (Faizullaev, 2017). Former U.S. President Trump traded written jabs with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Prior to that, he attacked Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau for being "two-faced" (Casiano, 2020). During his presidential tenure, Trump was a convenient and constant target for verbal and written attacks from foreign adversaries and a target for personal mockery and jokes from allies.

What was the purpose of these and similar attacks? Are most of them just spontaneous emotional outbursts, well-planned actions, or something in between? What role have they historically played in international politics? How effective have they been yesterday and today? This chapter will answer some of these questions.

ON CHARACTER ATTACKS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Sovereign states and government institutions constantly interact across officially recognized borders. This process is commonly known as **international relations**. They relate to interstate finances and commerce, territorial disputes and their settlements, migration, military collaboration, sanctions, economic aid, cultural exchanges, and many other areas. State governments conduct official foreign policy, which are deliberate actions involving sanctioned communications and decisions involving other governments and foreign institutions. **Diplomacy**, as a prime tool of foreign policy, involves the practice of managing international relations by means of negotiations. Diplomats typically follow diplomatic protocol, or well-established rules of communication and engagement in international affairs.

Of course, behind official diplomatic statements, protocols, and bargaining sessions, there are real individuals who prepare those statements, write speeches, respond to questions during press conferences, and post remarks on Twitter. There are also politicians who are not formally involved in government foreign policy yet can influence it in many ways. Influential opinion makers, such as journalists, media commentators, professors, or former officials who usually do not formally represent any government institution often play a major role in communicating important messages about their country's foreign policy. And there is also the viewing, reading, and listening public—those individuals, interest groups, political parties, and constituencies that can impact foreign policy, directly and indirectly.

Despite the established rules of diplomatic engagement suggesting a formal, often plain and deliberately polite language of communications, character attacks endured in diplomatic history and certainly are present in today's international relations. Because the era of secret diplomatic correspondence and confidential communications of political leaders has been challenged by the democratic practice of transparency, which

became even more possible with today's social networks, character assassination as a process is likely to play an important role in a country's foreign policy and in international affairs in general. There are several interconnected areas in which we discuss such a role.

Character attacks can be part of planned **psychological warfare**, which is deliberate manipulation of information to influence emotions, judgement, and subsequent behavior of individuals or groups to fulfill particular political goals. These actions, of course, are not rooted in nonscientific concepts such as a "sixth sense" or "mental telepathy," and similar bogus ideas common in sci-fi movies or comedies. Today's psychological warfare uses algorithms, automation, and big data to launch attacks, spread disinformation, and shape public opinion. A handful of sophisticated state actors, including Russia, China, Iran, India, and Venezuela, have specifically been using computational propaganda for their foreign influence operations (Shirayev & Mölder, 2020).

WHY CHARACTER ATTACKS ARE LAUNCHED

Within a country, character attacks against foreign leaders can serve to strengthen or sometimes weaken that government's pursuit of official foreign policy objectives. In other words, character attacks can facilitate foreign policy as well as put some brakes on it. It all depends on specific domestic circumstances.

For example, media attacks on a certain foreign leader, mocking and ridiculing this leader in social media, can correspond with the own government's critical or confrontational diplomatic and political course toward that leader's country. British printed propaganda in the early 1800s, as you remember from Chapter 5, relentlessly targeted Napoleon, who had declared himself Emperor of France and conquered large parts of Europe. Cartoons and pamphlets ridiculing and attacking Napoleon were plenty. The U.S. media, especially in cartoons in the early 1980s, often portrayed Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989), Supreme Leader of Iran, as a bloodthirsty monster or savage. Prior to that, Iran initiated a harsh anti-American policy in 1979 and kept 52 embassy staff hostage for 444 days, thus prompting a full-blown breach with the United States as well as Washington's political and military response. Personal attacks against other Iranian leaders reflect the critical mood of American people toward Iranian government. For decades, more than 80 percent of Americans consistently maintained a negative view of Iran (Gallup, 2020).

In this last example, the government in Washington had very little or no control at all over the press or television in the United States. The campaign of name-calling and ridiculing Iranian leaders was the result of the dominant "climate of opinion" among American journalists and political commentators—the predominant sentiment toward a foreign country, its leaders, or a specific foreign policy strategy. In Iran, on the other hand, the state-controlled media was behind a smear campaign and other character attacks against U.S. leaders, such as President Carter and then Reagan. Government policies and personal journalistic choices may or may not overlap. Some journalists in Iran, perhaps, disagreed with such characterizations of American leaders. At the same time, we can assume that many Iranian journalists personally supported an

anti-American campaign launched by the government. We have already discussed the choices that journalists make in authoritarian and democratic societies in Chapters 10 and 11.

Satirical publications, critical messages, or caricatures attacking foreign leaders have a largely symbolic meaning. A degrading caricature or an offensive name attached to a foreign president do not possess destructive power, as missiles or economic sanctions do. Character attacks mostly help consolidate public opinion *within* the country. A strong consolidated opinion in democracy is often helpful during elections or when one is lobbying for a foreign policy resolution or an appropriations bill. In authoritarian states, a consolidated public opinion makes it easier for authorities to encourage people of such countries to endure difficulties, hunt down the opposition, or resist “foreign enemies.” A mobilized public opinion makes it easier for a government to charge people into battle against other countries.

Character attacks against foreign leaders can be launched for ideological reasons: it is assumed that liberal politicians support their kind in other countries by attacking the conservative politicians there, and conservatives, for example, support conservatives by attacking liberals. It is not perhaps surprising that back in 2007, British MP Boris Johnson, who is conservative, wrote a column in which he commented about U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton, “she’s got dyed blonde hair and pouty lips, and a steely blue stare, like a sadistic nurse in a mental hospital” (Woolf, 2016). It is unlikely that such negative characterizations would have affected American public opinion: how many voters in Iowa or Virginia would base their electoral choice on the comments from a British politician? It is plausible that this character attack was a message to conservative voters in the United Kingdom. By attacking foreign leaders whom you oppose ideologically, you send assurances to your own base.

How could character attacks harm one’s own country’s foreign policy? This happens sometimes. For example, the United Kingdom’s commitment to the United States during the invasion and occupation of Iraq in the early 2000s was a constant challenge for the ruling Labour Party. U.S. President Bush was under relentless attack from Britain’s liberal media, that portrayed him as a brainless warmonger and an incompetent fool. British Prime Minister Blair was often called Uncle Sam’s “poodle.” He also gained the nickname “Blair” for misinforming the British public about the threat posed by Iraq and for involving Britain in the war under false pretenses (Casey, 2009, pp. 12–14). Character attacks, if they are frequent and relentless, thus become detectable reflections of public opinion, almost like opinion polls, which government officials should notice. And, similarly to the cases we have already mentioned, such attacks can consolidate opposition to a government or a government foreign policy. A caricature or a tweet mocking a leader can be more powerful than several opinion editorials explaining why a certain foreign policy is a mistake.

If countries are at war with each other, or have long-term adversarial relations, like the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, governments often propagate an **enemy image** of the opposing nation. Such images tend to stereotype a country’s entire population as a homogenous collective whose “bad” and “evil” characteristics are the opposite of the domestic population’s “good” qualities. Where the home population is strong, brave, and freedom-loving, the enemy population is weak,

cowardly, and slavish (Keen, 1991). Enemy images can also be applied to the leader of the opposing nation. Because the propaganda then targets a specific individual, we can regard it as a form of character assassination. Picturing a foreign leader such as an emperor, president, or military commander as a bloodthirsty monster or pathetic clown serves the purpose of mobilizing domestic public opinion, as we have suggested earlier in this chapter. Such stereotypes are created and then disseminated by newspapers, magazines, TV shows, and other media supporting government policy. During World War II, American media portrayed Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo in various cartoonish, childish ways (see Image 12.1). Some of the images were clearly racist. In the past 50 years, Western countries have cultivated cartoonish and scary enemy images of Fidel Castro of Cuba, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, and Kim Jong-Un of North Korea, among many others.

Character attacks aligned with the government's foreign policy course can also be subtle. In 2020, *The Onion*, a popular satirical source, issued a fake poll, which quoted white rural Americans praising then-president of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a good guy “despite” being a Muslim (which is a cruel mockery), with respondents allegedly saying that they would be willing to grab a drink with him, but not with President Obama (another mockery, for Ahmadinejad did not drink alcohol). This fake story was mistakenly picked up by Iranian Fars news agency as a real fact—and the information of this blunder went viral on social networks (Martinez, 2012). The original

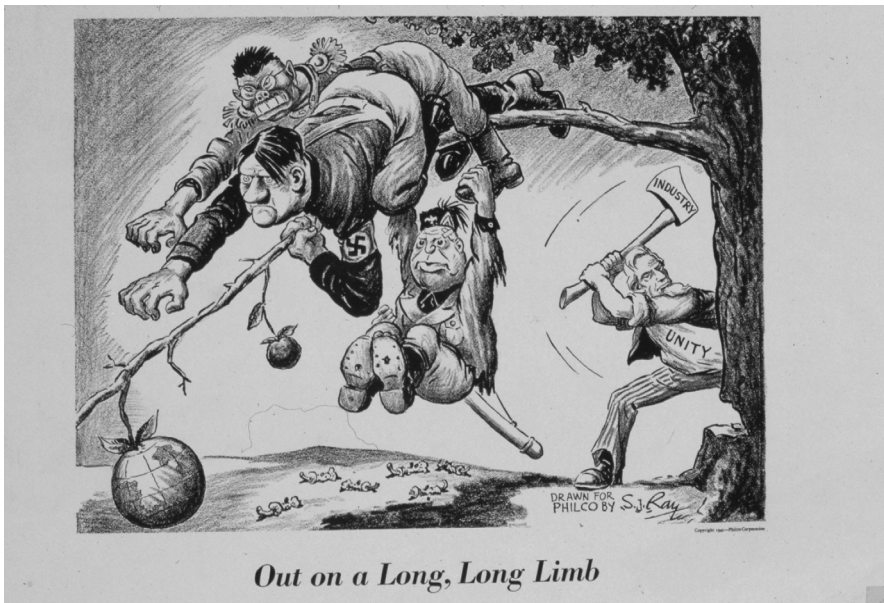


IMAGE 12.1 In this cartoon from World War II, enemy images of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Hideki Tojo make a grab for world domination. Notice in particular the racist stereotypes in the portrayal of Tojo

Source: Photo courtesy of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

publication was obviously a prank, a mockery of Iran's president and of the Iranian political system.

So far, we have discussed character attacks on foreign leaders that are aimed at *domestic* audiences. However, such slanders can cross national boundaries as well. Character attacks launched in one country can play a role in elections in foreign countries, assuming that voters in those countries are aware of such attacks. This was very difficult and even impossible a few decades ago, when a newspaper publication, say, in the United Kingdom would remain almost unknown in Japan, unless the publication was translated and published there. Today, a posted caricature or a tweet can reach millions in hours and in different corners of the planet. Such international attacks have already been tried, for instance during the U.S. elections in 2016 and 2020, when Russia launched an "experimental" smear campaign against Hillary Clinton (Shirayev, 2019).

Character assassination for international audiences can appear in the form of false allegations, exaggerations, bogus translations, scorning, and slander. There are "traditional" targets, like Hungarian-born American billionaire, investor, and philanthropist George Soros, who has been accused of being responsible for organizing political unrest in Georgia, Ukraine, Russia, and other countries, which Russia considers to be within its sphere of influence. And there have been new attacks on influential figures like Bill Gates who was accused by Russian public figures of advocating that sinister microchips be implanted in human bodies by global scientist-conspirators to control human behavior. This could have been regarded as a delusion, if this belief were not so widespread in Russia. We do not claim that a foreign government has initiated and spread these bizarre rumors. Our examples are meant to suggest, using strategic imagination, how easy such attacks can be organized against key decision makers and how quickly such attacks can become effective (Shirayev & Mölder, 2020).

Last but not least, character attacks against foreign leaders can be launched without any coherent policy objectives behind them. Sometimes they occur simply because the attacker (a political leader or a blogger) wants to "settle a score" with an influential foreigner (a political leader too)—for whatever reason, such as to get publicity. Writing a serious political opinion editorial often requires professional credentials and qualifications, as well as a serious analysis of an issue or policy at stake. Open character attacks on a foreign leader take less preparation and are potentially just as effective. They may attract immediate attention and generate online comments and "likes"—an ultimate measure of popularity these days, comparable to the number of newspapers sold in the 20th century.

Examining character attacks within an international dimension shows how attacks have been used in the past. We also can trace or suggest some measurable and also probable effects of attacks on domestic as well as international politics. Let's look at examples from history and from more recent developments.

BUILDING AN ENEMY IMAGE

As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, severe political tensions, or even a state of open war between countries, often lead to the cultivation of enemy images of the rival

nation's leader. An example of this could be the massive, bipartisan barrage of character attacks in the United States and other Western countries against the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in the midst of the 2020 pandemic. He was portrayed as power-hungry, cold, and a manipulative liar. Similar examples of enemy image-building are plentiful in history.

A striking historical example of this concerns perhaps the most famous woman from the ancient world: Queen Cleopatra of Egypt (69–30 BCE; see Image 12.2). During her reign, Egypt's days as the most powerful kingdom in the Mediterranean were long gone. The country had practically become a client state of a new superpower: the rising Roman Empire. In her efforts to maintain good relations with Rome, but also safeguard Egyptian independence, Cleopatra began amorous affairs with two of Rome's most prominent generals. She first got together with Julius Caesar—with whom she produced a son, Caesarion—and then, after his death, with his right-hand man, Mark Antony—with whom she also produced three children. However, Antony was vying for control over the Empire with Octavian, Caesar's posthumously adopted son and heir. The two men had divided Roman territories between them, with Octavian residing in Rome and controlling the Western half of the Mediterranean, while Antony resided with Cleopatra in Alexandria and controlled the Eastern half.



IMAGE 12.2 In this painting by Gerard de Lairese from the 17th century, Cleopatra is competing with Mark Antony to throw the most lavish banquet. She won after dissolving a pearl in vinegar and drinking it

Source: Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Public Domain

It was clear that the uneasy alliance between Octavian and Mark Antony would not last. Ultimately, the Roman Empire could only have one lord and master. But when both sides started gearing up for war, much of Octavian's hostile propaganda was directed against Cleopatra. She was portrayed as the decadent queen of a decadent country, a scheming seductress who had wrapped Mark Antony around her finger. In the *Elegies* of the contemporary poet Propertius, who had close ties to Octavian—or rather, to Emperor Augustus, as he would become known once he had won the war and seized the supreme rule—Cleopatra is described as the “harlot queen of licentious Canopus,” who had “dared to . . . force the [Roman river] Tiber to endure the threats of the Nile” (3.11.39–42; Propertius, 1990). Mark Antony, Octavian suggested, had once been a brave Roman man, but had fallen under the spell of this crafty foreign queen and had become her devoted slave. At the opulent Alexandrian court, he had grown soft and forgotten his Roman roots (Borgies, 2016). In a daring move, the future emperor managed to obtain Antony's will, which was kept in a temple in Rome, and read it to the Roman people. As it turned out, the document decreed that Antony proclaimed the legitimacy of Caesar and Cleopatra's bastard son Caesarion, named his own children with Cleopatra as his heirs, and wanted to be buried beside her in Alexandria. While scholars think that the will was probably genuine (Johnson, 1978), Octavian's spin turned it into a very effective propaganda tool, suggesting that Antony was no longer loyal to Rome, but to Cleopatra.

The focus on the Egyptian queen as the true enemy, with Antony reduced to the role of her love-smitten sidekick, was a propagandistic masterstroke. First, in the macho culture of ancient Rome, any man who made himself subservient to a woman lost all claims to masculinity. He could no longer be taken seriously. Antony was thus turned into a girlified caricature, a laughingstock. Second, the prospect of civil war, of Romans killing Romans, did not sit easy with Octavian's supporters. It is hard to style yourself as a glorious victor if the blood you have shed is that of your own countrymen. Defeating an arrogant foreign enemy, on the other hand, stood in a proud Roman tradition going back centuries. When Octavian had defeated Antony and Cleopatra in 30 BCE, he triumphantly proclaimed the conquest of Egypt to the cheering crowds in Rome.

Enemy images also played a prominent role in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both countries depicted the other side and their leaders as a menace which had to be stopped at all costs. These images were constructed along ideological lines. In the Soviet Union, the United States' leaders were associated with insatiable capitalistic greed, while American propaganda warned that the communist “Reds” wanted nothing less than world domination. These hostile portrayals did not usually refer to the common people of both nations, who were seen as misled or held captive by evil regimes (Rieber & Kelly, 1991, pp. 25–29). American and Russian leaders, on the other hand, were frequently targeted propaganda produced by their ideological rival. In American posters and cartoons, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin appears as a sinister-looking thug, as a spider, or as an octopus spreading its tentacles over the world (Keen, 1991).

The next Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, was portrayed as an undedicated simpleton, a clown having direct access to nuclear missiles. The next leader, Leonid

Brezhnev (1906–1982), especially from the late 1970s was depicted as an old, slow, and senile man with no opinion of his own. In the Soviet Union, Western leaders, and especially American presidents, were rendered as either crazy fools or dangerous monsters. Especially harsh were the attacks against U.K. Prime Minister Thatcher and U.S. President Reagan, who were frequently portrayed in caricatures as scary monsters. These examples are indicative of the act of dehumanization, discussed in Chapter 5: the enemy is no longer recognized as a human being who could be reasoned with, but as a vicious animal with an instinct to kill or enslave. This way of mutual depiction certainly reflected the unwillingness of coming to reasoning, negotiations, or a diplomatic understanding, so that only avoidance and violence remained an option.

MOBILIZING POLITICAL FORCES

In modern times, attacks on foreign leaders launched from one country can mobilize parts of oppositional public opinion in the target country too, thus weakening that country's government. We have already discussed Cold War propaganda. This was not just aimed at domestic audiences in the United States and the Soviet Union. During the 1970s and 1980s, American media sustained a constant and bipartisan informational effort to discredit communist leaders of socialist countries, mostly in Eastern Europe. Discreditation served a very important domestic political goal during the Cold War and also, in part, targeted susceptible citizens in socialist countries, especially those disappointed with their governments and leaders. Propaganda portrayed these leaders as old, senile, mentally inept, stupid, greedy, and corrupt. The West successfully boosted the mood of political and ideological disillusionment in these countries. Today, we know how unenthusiastic many in those countries were toward their governments. If you have a very unpopular leader in your country, you tend to expect character attacks against him or her.

Media reports, stories, or direct insults that contain mocking, teasing, and even humiliating of leaders of unfriendly governments usually find a receptive audience at home, as the opening vignette to this chapter suggests. They serve as a factor of political mobilization, discussed in Chapters 9 and 10. A poster appeared on metro bus booths in Moscow in 2016 depicting U.S. President Obama smoking a cigarette. The caption read: "Smoking kills more people than Obama. Do not smoke, do not be like Obama" (Luhn, 2016). The relations between Moscow and Washington were at a very low level at that time and all public opinion polls also showed very low levels of positive attitudes among Russians toward the United States. About 20 percent expressed a positive view and 60 percent a negative view of America, with even more people criticizing Washington's foreign policy. As you can imagine, such posters did not raise serious objections from many Russians at that time. Nevertheless, they were removed quickly, allegedly for looking artistically tasteless.

Mocking and ridiculing a foreign leader often helps in attacking certain political forces at home. For example, during the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential campaigns, several candidates from the Democratic Party, such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernie

Sanders, who ran from a progressive political platform (a term for left-wing policies), were often associated with communist leaders, especially the late Fidel Castro of Cuba. This kind of attack is subtle: placing a very unpopular foreign political figure side-by-side with a political candidate can be politically damaging for the candidate. The best example is German Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, who is such a deeply loathed figure that associating current-day politicians with him has become a veritable cliché in countries all over the Western world (Laruelle, 2018).

Many forms of symbolic insult in diplomacy existed in the past and continue today. Snubbing has long been part of the diplomatic game and was used to make a point, to send a message, or indicate a position without a formal action or statement. This happened even in medieval times. In 968 CE, Bishop Liutprand of Cremona (Italy) went on a diplomatic mission to Constantinople in the name of the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I (912–973), who ruled large parts of what is now Germany and Italy. Otto had been engaged in a territorial dispute with the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus II Phocas (ca. 912–969), who rejected his claim to emperorship. It was Liutprand's assignment to establish peace between the two powerful monarchs—and, to seal the bond, to persuade Nicephorus to have his daughter, princess Theophanu, marry Otto's son, the future emperor Otto II. However, the bishop and his party did not receive a warm welcome in Constantinople. In Liutprand's detailed and rather sour report of the diplomatic mission, he complains to his master Otto and to Otto's son that “as a mark of disrespect to yourselves, being shamefully received, we were harshly and shamefully treated.” The European envoys were housed in a remote dwelling, “so far removed from the palace that our breath was taken away when we walked there.” They were guarded at all times and not allowed to leave the premises. There was no water available in the house, but only Greek wine, which Liutprand declared undrinkable. Moreover, the warden who was supposed to take care of them was a fiend: “If one were to look for his like, not earth, but perhaps hell, would furnish it; for he, like an inundating torrent, poured forth on us whatever calamity, whatever plunder, whatever expense, whatever torment, whatever misery he could invent” (Liutprand of Cremona, 1910, p. 442).

Things only became worse from there. When Liutprand was brought before the Emperor Nicephorus, the latter blatantly said that Otto's impiety prevented him from receiving his envoy with kindness and honor (p. 444). Throughout the time Liutprand spent at the Byzantine court, the emperor and the bishop kept trading veiled and not-so-veiled barbs and insults. At a banquet, Liutprand was seated next to a primitive-looking, unwashed Bulgarian envoy. Taking this as a mortal insult, he rose to leave in protest, whereupon he was given to understand that the Bulgarian actually outranked him and was ordered to take his meal with the servants instead (p. 451). On another occasion, when Liutprand had bought five splendid purple robes to take back home to Cremona, Nicephorus forced him to hand them over, “for, as we surpass other nations in wealth and wisdom, so also we ought to surpass them in dress; so that those who are singularly endowed with virtue, should have garments unique in beauty.” Liutprand snapped back that, in Western Europe, such robes were hardly unique, but were worn by “street-walkers and conjurers” (p. 469). The embassy, in short, was a frustrating

experience for him. At every possible opportunity, Emperor Nicephorus made it plain how much he looked down upon the bishop and his imperial master.

The British journalist Paul Reynolds (2010) noted that “the snub is an accepted part of the delicate diplomatic life, and done deftly, can make a point,” and “they are often signs of an underlying problem.” Michael McFaul, a newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to Russia, arrived in Moscow only a month after the December 2011 largest anti-government demonstrations in the country since the early 1990s. As special assistant to Obama on Russian affairs from 2009 to 2012, McFaul was the architect of the effort to rearrange relations between the two countries after they hit post-Cold War low levels under the presidency of George W. Bush. One of the foundations of the Obama’s *reset policy* was to deemphasize the policy of “democracy promotion,” a discredited hallmark of the president Bush era, that had for a few years particularly irritated Moscow. The new reset strategy was to create a bilateral agenda based on pragmatic attitudes of *realpolitik*—emphasizing improving economic ties, promoting investments, helping Russia gain admittance in the World Trade Organization in 2012, reducing nuclear arms, and working together to fight global terrorism.

However, as Russians saw it, instead of a standard, reserved career diplomat, Washington appointed McFaul. A former university professor, he had been very critical of the Russian government’s human rights record and authoritarian policies. In addition, President Putin, feeling betrayed by the domestic urban middle classes and neglected and offended by the West, launched a new foreign-policy strategy. A raw, sarcastic, venomous, and angry anti-Americanism, unknown since the seventies, suffused Kremlin policy and the state-run airwaves. Although McFaul was a chief guide on Russia at the National Security Council, Moscow still considered him a lightweight.

McFaul immediately became a target of vicious criticisms. Russian television quickly attacked McFaul as a villain for his 2002 book *Russia’s Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*, claiming that the title of the book was an indicator of his subversive plan to overthrow the government in Moscow. He invited opposition leaders and human rights activists to a meeting on his second day on the job. Walking on a street, he was nearly pushed and shoved by a small crowd of Russian reporters. He was recorded saying, “what a wild country” (in English the translation of the Russian word “wild” can also be interpreted as “crazy”). This and other missteps sealed his fate.

He was first called an “unreasonable” and “prejudiced” man. Then things escalated. Some commentators compared him to Hitler (an “Internet Fuhrer”). He was branded a spy. He was ridiculed for his American accent when he was speaking Russian to reporters or in public. He was teased for being an “amateur” and an incompetent man. And the smear machine was just warming up. In February, Russia’s YouTube channel featured a video in which a reporter was showing passersby on Russian streets a photo of two men. One picture was McFaul’s mug shot and the other was a photo of a convicted Russian pedophile. People were asked to choose which was the pedophile. The edited video showed everyone pointing to the picture of McFaul. The stunt bore all the “trademarks” of the pro-Putin youth group Nashi, which has used similar tactics to obliterate the reputation of several government opponents (Dean, 2016; Laskin, 2012; see Table 12.1).

TABLE 12.1 Quantitative illustrations of character attacks against Mike McFaul

Names, labels, and phrases (in Russian)	Number of Google “hits”
McFaul	846,000
Spy	140,000
Pedophile	95,400
Liar	27,600
Illiterate	17,500
Internet Fuhrer	15,500
Arrogant	13,600
Dilettante	12,000
Russophobe	7,410
Incompetent	2,100
Non-professional	1,710
“Bad Russian (language)”	457

Facing regular attacks in the media and feeling hostility and emotional pressure, McFaul grew increasingly frustrated and bitter (as he admitted later in his interviews). This contributed to his resignation after just two years in Moscow as an ambassador (Remnick, 2018). The relentless character attacks against him could indicate that McFaul had been singled out as a “scapegoat”: Moscow sought any possible way to scorn Washington’s diplomacy, and he was a convenient target. His case also suggests that Moscow was trying to consolidate anti-American and anti-Western public opinion by character-attacking one of those “incompetent” and “stupid” Western “mouth-pieces” and “puppets” who simply hate Russia.

ATTACKS IN THE NAME OF SELF-DEFENSE

Character attacks against foreign leaders can also be used to insulate domestic leaders from criticism. The 2020 pandemic put large parts of the world in lock-down for months, claimed tens of thousands of lives, and cost trillions of dollars to the global economy. It is not surprising, then, that the crisis provoked, facilitated, and was associated with a slew of personal attacks and counterattacks launched by the leaders of countries and international organizations. Most criticisms were about mistakes and miscalculations of other countries’ governments and leaders for their handling of the pandemic. Such critical comments referring to specific strategies of governments and related institutional policies were not character attacks, as we have learned early in

the book. However, as we know politics tends to be personalized, especially foreign policy, because it is often judged via the statements, speeches, and press conferences of the country's top leaders. When an online publication is critical of a policy of a foreign country (such as Venezuela or Sudan, for example), it often is critical of the leader who represents this country. In essence, guilty, responsible, or not, presidents and prime ministers are often the targets of criticisms and attacks.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the most frequent targets of attacks were the Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Tedros Adhanom, Head of the World Health Organization. Chinese Vice President Chen Chien-jen criticized the WHO leader for his carelessness (Strong, 2020). Among the Republican Party commentators in Washington, the 55-year-old Adhanom from Ethiopia also became the Trump administration's punching bag for some time (Shesgreen, 2020). He was accused of being too complacent toward China, too cozy with Beijing for not challenging that country's initial actions in dealing with the virus. Twitter postings—by private individuals—portrayed the Chinese leader walking a dog with the facial features of Adhanom on a leash, with the caption “The Beijing Breed.” Xi himself was attacked, too, for lying about the spread of the virus to preserve the Communist Party's image. He was also mocked for his self-appointment as “president for life”—a clear sign of despotism and a reason for low personal accountability (Jian, 2020).

The motives behind these character attacks are not hard to guess. Both the Chinese government and the White House administration suffered great reputational damage because of their inadequate initial response to the health crisis. While explaining their policies, it appears in the spring of 2020 that both needed a scapegoat to absolve themselves from criticisms. The intended effect of these international character attacks, then, was to improve the standing of the Chinese and American governments in the eyes of their own citizens, as well as in the eyes of the international community.

DEFENDING AGAINST ATTACKS

Governments often do everything in their power to shut down undesirable information. During the Cold War, the KGB, the Soviet top security agency, spent substantial funds and mobilized scores of its agents to prevent the spread of disparaging information against Soviet leaders (including jokes and caricatures). A person could face serious employment or legal consequences for publicly telling disparaging jokes or even keeping them in a typed form in their homes. Any journal smuggled from the West or any manuscript published illegally in the Soviet Union and containing critical information about the founders of the Soviet state or its current leaders—such as stories of them being intellectually shallow, greedy, or plain stupid—would have been confiscated and their owners criminally charged (Shlapentokh, 2001). These restricting policies were extremely costly and generally ineffective. By deliberately suppressing character attacks against the country's unpopular communist leaders, the government, in fact, in some ways was strengthening the country's domestic opposition to the ruling regime.

The government of the Soviet Union was certainly not the first one to try to crack down on subversive propaganda printed abroad. In 18th-century France, there was a flourishing trade in pamphlets, newsletters, poems, and biographies slandering the members of the royal house and government officials. These so-called *libelles*, written by French as well as foreign critics of the regime, revealed real or alleged scandalous facts about the lives of the high and mighty, mocking them for their corruption, incompetence, and sexual exploits. For instance, they portrayed King Louis XV as a lecherous man who could not control his sexual impulses and became infatuated with a string of mistresses, to whom he surrendered all his power (Darnton, 2010, pp. 295–299). It was illegal to publish such slanders in France, where the king wielded absolute power, but printers in London, Amsterdam, and elsewhere were happy to provide for the French market. Their publications were clandestinely sold in Parisian cafés, but also at markets, docks, and other public places throughout the country, and were greedily consumed by the reading public.

French authorities made efforts to stop the spread of these scandalous publications, which undermined the prestige of the king, the nobility, and the government. Between 1659 and 1789, they locked up an estimated 135 people in the Bastille prison for writing, printing, or spreading *libelles* (Darnton, 2010, pp. 257–258). A high-ranking police officer, Jean-Charles-Pierre Lenoir, kept a sharp eye on the underground literature circulating in Paris. From his notes, it is clear that he took the threat posed by these *libelles* very seriously and worried about their increasingly sharp tone. There were even French police inspectors active in London to track down and arrest those slandering the French elite. Their efforts were mocked in 1783 in *Le Diable dans un bénitier*, a comical piece of writing which presents these London inspectors as a bunch of clowns bungling up their assignments. As it turned out, the flow of slanderous books, pamphlets, and newsletters was impossible to stop. Robert Darnton (2010), one of the foremost experts on defamatory literature in early modern France, is uncertain how much the *libelles* influenced public opinion, but thinks they certainly helped to mobilize popular anger against the regime (p. 441). With the French Revolution of 1789, this anger erupted. Many aristocratic heads would roll under the blade of the guillotine—including those of the king and queen themselves.

ATTACKS BACKFIRING

Sometimes, a character attack against the leader of a foreign country can have a negative effect on the intended target, but can also harm the reputation of the attacker's own government. This was the case when the German comedian Jan Böhmermann (see Image 12.3) recited a poem insulting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in his satire show *Neo Magazin Royale* in 2016. Böhmermann did so because Erdogan had responded aggressively to a mocking song taking him to task for his human rights abuses in another German satire show. In response, an angry Erdogan demanded that Böhmermann be criminally prosecuted for slandering a foreign head of state—which the German government initially agreed to do. Moreover, Chancellor Angela Merkel issued an official apology to the Turkish leader. Although her stance was probably



IMAGE 12.3 German comedian Jan Böhmermann satirically insulted the Turkish president, which prompted a controversial official apology from German Chancellor Angela Merkel

Source: Photo by Jonas Rogowski, CC BY-SA 3.0

motivated by diplomatic considerations, German media severely criticized her. Many believed that Merkel's response created the impression that she bowed to the whims of a foreign dictator and did not stand up for freedom of speech (Smale, 2016). The charges against Böhmermann would later be dropped, but by then the damage to Erdogan's and Merkel's reputations had already been done.

Both the German and Turkish leaders were known as tough and efficient politicians, one working in a democratic society, the other an autocratic individual. Has the fact that one of them is a man and the other is a woman affected their exposure to character attacks and their vulnerability as targets? What role does gender play in reputational politics? This will be the subject of our next chapter.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Countries' leaders use diplomacy to conduct relations with other countries. Very often, their personal attitudes affect international relations too. Despite the established rules of diplomatic engagement suggesting a formal and deliberately polite language of communications, character attacks have endured in diplomatic history and certainly are present in today's international relations.
- Character attacks can be part of planned psychological warfare, which is deliberate manipulation of information to influence emotions, judgement, and subsequent behavior of individuals or groups to fulfill particular political goals.

- Character attacks can facilitate foreign policy as well as put some brakes on it. Character attacks against foreign leaders can serve to strengthen or sometimes weaken the government's pursuit of official foreign policy objectives.
- A degrading caricature or an offensive name attached to a foreign president do not possess destructive power, as missiles or economic sanctions do. Character attacks against foreign leaders mostly help in consolidating public opinion *within* a country.
- If countries are at war with each other, or have long-term adversarial relations, governments often propagate an enemy image of the opposing nation. Such images tend to stereotype a country's entire population as a homogenous collective whose "bad" and "evil" characteristics are the opposite of the domestic population's "good" qualities.
- In modern times, attacks on foreign leaders launched from one country can mobilize parts of oppositional public opinion in the target country too, thus weakening that country's government. Media reports, stories, or direct insults that contain mocking, teasing, and even humiliating of leaders of unfriendly governments also usually find a receptive audience at home.
- Many forms of symbolic insult in diplomacy existed in the past and continue today. Snubbing has long been part of the diplomatic game and was used to make a point, to send a message, or indicate a position without a formal action or statement.
- Character attacks against foreign officials can be launched by other countries' officials in self-defense. Sometimes, a character attack against the leader of a foreign country can have a negative effect on the intended target and can also harm the reputation of the attacker's own government.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. What were the reasons for increasing tensions between Chinese and Soviet leaders in the 1950s? Find some cases in which leaders of two countries have had very poor personal relationships. Do political leaders in your opinion have the right to launch character attacks against each other? What goals would such attacks achieve?
2. Diplomats typically follow diplomatic protocol, or well-established formal rules of communication and engagement in international affairs. Do character attacks have a place in diplomacy, in your view?
3. Suppose you serve as an advisor to the president of a country. You know that the president is under constant character attacks. Would you recommend to respond to character attacks and defend the reputation or ignore them? In which cases, if any, would you recommend ignoring and in which cases would you respond? Explain your choices.
4. Imagine you are in charge of your country's cybersecurity. You have obtained verified evidence that a foreign country has deliberately launched a series of vicious character attacks against your country's leader, questioning her mental capacity in

the office. Would you recommend launching a similar attack against an opponent's leader? Discuss your answer from a political, security, and moral standpoint.

KEY TERMS

Diplomacy A prime tool of foreign policy, which involves the practice of managing international relations by means of negotiations.

Enemy image The stereotypical portrayal of a foreign country's entire population as a homogenous collective whose "bad" and "evil" characteristics are the opposite of the domestic population's "good" qualities.

International relations The process of interaction among sovereign states and government institutions across officially recognized borders.

Psychological warfare Deliberate manipulation of information to influence emotions, judgement, and subsequent behavior of individuals or groups to fulfill particular political goals.

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The Gender and Sexuality Factor

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Articulate the differences among sex, gender, and sexuality in the context of character and reputation.
- Explain an intersectional perspective to studying character assassination.
- Identify how sex, gender, and sexuality can be used in character attacks.
- Discuss venues for practical application of the knowledge of gender acquired in this chapter.

Perhaps no female politician has had as large of an impact on 20th-century politics and history as Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013; see Image 13.1). Serving for 11 years as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom until 1990, she was known as a formidable and aggressive leader. Dubbed “The Iron Lady” by a journalist, the nickname stuck as a way to describe her leadership style. Back in the 20th century it was uncommon for women to hold the highest political offices. Even these days, fewer than 15 percent of world countries have a female head of government or state (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Yet, Thatcher was the first woman to hold the Prime Minister role in the U.K. She was also the first woman to lead a cabinet in a major Western power. She was the longest-serving British politician of the 20th century (Gregory, 2013). She presided over a number of major economic policies, which have come to bear her name. Thatcherism’s tenets emphasized low taxes on business, increased defense spending, decreased government spending on social programs, and economic deregulation. The legacy of these policies is controversial today, but there is little doubt that she was responsible for leading her government through a fundamental realignment of priorities.

Thatcher loved winning in domestic political battles as well as in wars overseas. She even called her memoirs *Undefeated* (Moore, 2011). Despite her groundbreaking role as a high-ranking woman, Thatcher had a complicated relationship to feminism. As one journalist noted, Thatcher “benefited from the emancipation of women without showing the slightest interest in it” (Moore, 2011). In fact, she herself said in an



IMAGE 13.1 U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, as caricatured in the TV show *The Spitting Image*

Source: Photo by Matt Buck, CC BY-SA 2.0

interview that she “owe[d] nothing to women’s lib.” She was not invested in supporting and promoting women and only included one woman in her cabinet. She also played up her feminine side when it suited her political purposes (Murray, 2013). By all accounts, Thatcher loved tall, well-dressed, and courtly men. Journalists wrote about her love of manliness. Ronald Reagan once described her as “the best man of England” (Moore, 2011). Margaret Thatcher was a woman making her way in a man’s world, and she knew it, and she knew how to play to her strengths to accomplish her goals.

None of that is to say that Thatcher was welcomed into this political world with open arms. She was constantly under verbal and written attacks. Her opponents called her T.B.W., which stood for “That Bloody Woman.” She was slammed for a number of things that male politicians would not be criticized for, such as having a shrill voice and the way that she dressed, which was seen as dowdy and fussy (Moore, 2011). The press even talked about the fact that her teeth stuck out a bit. Moreover, when she dismissed or upbraided someone who worked for her, the press called it a “handbagging,” a reference to the purses she was famous for carrying. As Jenni Murray (2013) notes in the *Guardian*, “no one ever accuses men of giving an errant colleague a ‘briefcasing.’” This indicates that female politicians are often held to different standards than men. Media often focus on women in such a way that calls attention to their gender. One of the things that such coverage does is insinuate that women do not belong in high leadership roles. Another way of dealing with women in power is to suggest that

they are not acting like women. In fact, Thatcher herself was lampooned mercilessly using gendered attacks. *Spitting Image*, a satirical puppet show that aired on British television for 12 years, had a field day with Thatcher (*Spitting Image*, n.d.). The show caricatured celebrities and politicians and had an audience of up to 15 million people. *Spitting Image* showed Thatcher wearing men's suits and ties and chomping on a cigar. In one famous sketch, Thatcher and her all-male cabinet are eating at a restaurant. The waitress refers to Thatcher as "Sir" and asks what she would like to order. She orders a raw steak! In other sketches, she is yelling at her cabinet as they cower under the table. The creators of *Spitting Image* were not just critical of her personality—they used these sketches to critique her policies, too. And they are on the record saying that they didn't like her (Law, 2013)!

As this opening vignette suggests, the treatment of Thatcher by the media highlights a few important things about character assassination related to gender. For one, it shows that female politicians have to work much harder than men to be taken seriously. This is because the traits typically associated with femininity (such as caring for others and being kind and nurturing) are not generally associated with political leadership in most countries. In fact, acting this way can be seen as exposing one's weaker, softer side. By contrast, people tend to see effective leaders as assertive, decisive, and maybe even a little aggressive. Women who do display effective leadership, like Thatcher, are often accused of "acting like men." Being ruthlessly mocked and even portrayed as a man on *Spitting Image* was one of the prices Thatcher paid for her success. Gender scholars refer to this as a "double bind" for would-be female leaders (Anderson, 2017). Acting strong and tough is often necessary for politics, but women who conform with those behaviors are seen as unlikeable, masculine, and fake! Acting nice and kind is unlikely to get you elected because the public may see you as too weak to do the job.

What is a female politician to do? There are no easy answers. But, as this chapter will show, numerous character attacks in history and today have something to do with gender. And while men tend to have it easier than women in this regard, they too can be attacked for their alleged failure to live up to masculine standards. Assessments and responses to such attacks require knowledge and, of course, critical thinking.

DEFINING TERMS

You may think that we have spent enough time in this book providing definitions for amorphous concepts like character. And that may be true, but it is important to understand exactly what we mean when we say that targets can be attacked based on gender. So, let's spend a second defining our terms for this chapter.

The term **sex** refers to anatomical and physiological characteristics or features of males and females, the two typically assigned sexes. These features include at least four commonly recognized clusters, such as external genitalia (the body's reproductive organs), glands, hormones, and chromosomes. For example, women have a uterus and ovaries, and men have a prostate gland and testicles. When we refer to sex, we are talking, in most cases, about a person's genitals. We call a person with male genitals like a penis a man and a person with female genitals like breasts and a vagina a female.

However, this common sex dichotomy (either—or) does not accurately represent reality. Some individuals are born with sexual anatomy or reproductive organs, and often chromosome patterns, that do not fit the typical definition of man or woman. The intersex category is based on the features that fall between distinct male and female characteristics. These days we understand sex as a continuum, although most people's bodies fall largely into the binary categories of male or female (Little, 2013).

As soon as sex is assigned at birth, people start acting toward the child in accordance with the popular norms and expectations. The names, the clothes, and the toys that children play with are often distinctly attached to their sex. **Gender** is a complex set of behavioral, cultural, or psychological features associated with an individual's sex. Gender as a concept has a significant social component: it is the state of being male or female and practicing informally prescribed cultural norms (such as customs), following expectations about what a person should do as a member of a particular sex, and adhering to formal legal rules (the law) that mandate or prohibit particular actions. For example, boys may conventionally be given toy cars and swords to play with, while girls are given dolls and dresses. Many cultures expect women to wear makeup and high heels as a display of elegance, while a man wearing these things could be severely ridiculed and ostracized. In traditional Islamic communities, women may only appear in public wearing a headscarf. Saudi Arabia allowed women to drive cars only after 2017!

As one of the author's college professors liked to quip, sex is what you have, gender is what you do with it. When an individual learns about or identifies with a particular gender, this process involves understanding, evaluating, and accepting particular patterns of behavior. They are called **gender roles**—prescriptions and expectations assigned to genders on the female–male continuum. People express their genders through their habits, interests, behaviors, clothing, haircuts, and manners of speaking, walking, and using their voices.

When sex and gender do match up, we call those people cisgender. We typically describe gender by using words like “masculine” and “feminine.” What exactly it means to be masculine differs culturally. Clothing is just one example of this. In American culture, wearing dresses or skirts is considered a feminine characteristic. But, in Middle Eastern, Asian, or African cultures, sarongs, robes, or gowns are worn by men (Little, 2013). When Scottish men wear kilts, for example, they are not seen as feminine! When Margaret Thatcher wore skirts, pearls, high heels, and hats, she was conforming to a typical feminine gender presentation. In more recent years, the term **LGBTQ** (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer) gained popularity; this is an umbrella term for those who may be **gender nonconforming**—people whose gender identity or gender expression does not conform to that typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. Some who do not identify as either male or female sometimes prefer the term *genderqueer* or *gender-variant*.

In most parts of the world it is typical to view gender as a binary. That means, we tend to see people as either masculine or feminine. We identify two genders: male or female. The clothes we tend to buy and the restrooms we use are often predicated upon gender binaries. People who do not identify as a binary gender are considered non-binary (Blair, 2018). To some individuals, as you can expect, disrupting the traditional

gender binary can be a dangerous proposition and a ground for character attacks against those who are seen as such “disruptors.”

Sexual orientation refers to romantic or sexual attraction to people of a specific sex or gender. Sexuality is the capacity for erotic experiences and related behavioral responses. We typically say that people who are attracted to people with the same genitalia that they have are gay or homosexual. By contrast, people who are attracted to those that are the opposite sex are straight or heterosexual. There are, of course, people who are attracted to both sexes, and we call those people bisexual. In other words, sexuality is who you go to bed with, while gender is who you go to bed as! While Thatcher was widely known to be heterosexual in her conventional marriage and her willingness to flirt with other male leaders, it is common for the media or observers to circulate rumors that strong or powerful women are lesbians, especially if they are single or divorced. In 2020, in the small European country Moldova, as soon as an independent female candidate became a frontrunner in presidential elections, the opposition media launched a barrage of criticisms about her being single, baseless innuendo about her being gay (she was not), and comparing her to a witch (WOMO, 2020). The media used these attacks to smear her reputation in the eyes of conservative voters.

One more thing is worth noting before moving on to describing how these concepts are relevant to character attacks. As we have discussed culture in Chapter 9, it is important to highlight the significance of **intersectionality**. Law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) coined the term “intersectionality” to describe how gender, race, and class overlap and intersect with one another to form our unique identities. The idea here is that the lived experiences of black women are different from white women, which are different from white men, for example. As a legal scholar, Crenshaw was concerned with how the law often overlooked these intersections and instead, solely dealt with gender or race in civil rights lawsuits (Coaston, 2019). Today, intersectionality is largely used to mean that people experience privilege and “discrimination differently depending on their overlapping identities” (Coaston, 2019). We bring up the concept here to remind readers that the examples we use in this chapter are never just about gender or sexuality, but should be understood within the dynamics of class and race as well. These intersections influence how the public responds to leaders and how character attacks play out.

GENDER AND CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

Gender has long provided fodder for character attacks. At the risk of oversimplification, character attacks based on gender typically comprise some type of accusation that the target is engaging in behavior that is a violation of appropriate gendered behavior. Now, again, it is important to emphasize that what counts as appropriate gendered behavior is historically and culturally specific. What it means to be, for example, an appropriate woman has varied throughout history. Appropriate behavior is also racialized and classed. For example, while it was not appropriate for upper-class women to engage in paid labor in the 19th century in the United States, working-class and poor women did so.

A striking example of a politician who got into trouble for violating gender norms comes from the days of the Roman Republic, more than two thousand years ago. Publius Clodius Pulcher was an ambitious young man from the upper classes who tried to make a name for himself in Roman politics. He was also attracted to Pompeia, the wife of the famous Julius Caesar. One night, Pompeia and other Roman noblewomen were celebrating a religious ceremony in Caesar's house, which men were not allowed to attend. Seeing this as a good opportunity to rendezvous with his love interest, Clodius dressed up as a woman and managed to gain entrance to the house! However, he was soon discovered and had to flee. As a result, the young man ended up in court and Caesar decided to divorce Pompeia, even though it appears she had not been in on the scheme.

The person who gave Clodius a hard time about this scandal was not Caesar, but his political arch enemy, the orator and statesman Cicero. For years afterwards, Cicero mocked Clodius in his speeches—and not so much for trying to seduce a respectable Roman lady, but because he had engaged in cross-dressing! The orator loved to describe how Clodius had put on an elegant female dress, adopted a tripping feminine gait, and had even smoothed his entire body to appear more ladylike (*In Clodium et Curionem*, fragment 21; Cicero, 1994). Many of these details were undoubtedly invented or embellished. Cicero emphasized them because they allowed him to portray Clodius as ridiculous and effeminate. He ignored the fact that the cross-dressing had just been a ploy to enter Caesar's house. Instead, he suggested that it revealed who Clodius really was: an effeminate sissy, driven by lust, who could not live up to the standards of a proper Roman man. The image would haunt Clodius for the rest of his life (Campanile, 2017, pp. 53–56; Icks & Shiraev, 2020, pp. 112–116).

When it comes to men in the United States and Western Europe, appropriate behavior typically involves demonstrating strength, decisiveness, and rationality. Men are expected to be bold and aggressive. Let's be clear—there are biological reasons why men as a group are physically stronger than women as a group in ways that may predispose aggressive behavior, such as the presence of more testosterone in their bodies. That said, most of these traits and their accompanying behaviors are not inherent or natural to men, but instead are learned or conditioned. Study after study shows, however, that these stereotypical masculine traits are also associated with leadership in both business and politics (Page, 2018; Smith, 2017). As Aidan Smith's (2017) expansive study of U.S. presidential campaigning shows, candidates for president have typically relied on several tropes of manhood to emphasize their fitness for office: (1) the warrior hero, which translates heroic military service into powerful leadership, (2) the self-made man, which emphasizes rugged individualism and a drive to succeed despite obstacles, and (3) the beneficent patriarch, a trope that emphasizes fatherhood and a paternal love of the nation (pp. 7–8). All of these tropes of manhood rely on promoting stereotypical masculine characteristics and leveraging them into effective political leadership (see Table 13.1).

As a result, political foes can gain a lot of leverage from using gendered attacks to make it seem like their opponents are not strong men and therefore, would be ineffective leaders. Terms like “wimp” or “sissy” are common to impugn manhood and can tar leaders pretty effectively. George H.W. Bush, the 41st president of the United States, led the country from 1989 to 1993, and the press routinely smeared him as a wimp.

TABLE 13.1 Tropes of presidential manhood

Trope	Definition	Example
Warrior Hero	Using leadership on the battlefield as political power	George Washington’s role as commanding officer in the battle for independence from Great Britain
Self-Made Man	Using a story about overcoming humble beginnings with intelligence and strength to prove grit and relatability	Theodore Roosevelt’s travels through North Dakota to prove his toughness
Beneficent Patriarch	Using one’s role as father and experience with wise judgment to prove effective temperament	George H.W. Bush surrounding himself with children and grandchildren throughout his campaign

During his campaign for the presidency, *Doonesbury*, a nationally circulated comic strip noted that he had “embattled manhood.” A 1987 article in *Newsweek* had as its headline, “Bush Battles the Wimp Factor” (qtd. in Taibbi, 2018). Bush spent much of the campaign trying to rehabilitate his masculine image. The prominent speechwriter Peggy Noonan composed Bush’s 1988 nomination acceptance address, which critics admitted was designed to create a manly image of the president. One of such critics wrote that Bush’s speech was

a long-winded promise to kick more little asses, but with real arms this time. “Weakness tempts aggressors. Strength stops them,” [Bush] growled. “I will not allow this country to be made weak again. Never.” His image rose with male voters after this address.

(Taibbi, 2018)

Bush was ultimately able, at least during the campaign, to overcome his image as a wimp. The media partially helped him by determining that his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, was far wimpier (Curtis, 1989; Schneider, 2004; see Image 13.2). For one thing, Dukakis was only 5 feet, 8 inches tall, much shorter than Bush’s 6 foot 2. For another, Dukakis was not as experienced in foreign policy as Bush. A disastrous photo opportunity of him looking like a toy soldier in a massive tank also fueled his wimpy image (King, 2013), as did his assertion that he would not seek the death penalty in a hypothetical case involving a criminal who raped his wife, Kitty (Schneider, 2004). Of course, once the elder Bush was elected president, his wimpy reputation returned. Some journalists suggest that his aggressiveness in foreign policy was a response to fear about this reputation (Taibbi, 2018).

This is just one example, but it highlights how damaging being seen as lacking appropriate masculinity or manliness can be for male leaders. Conservative commentator Ann Coulter, for instance, called Donald Trump “the biggest wimp to ever serve as president” after he made a deal with Democrats to reopen the government after a shutdown in



IMAGE 13.2 Michael Dukakis tried to strike a tough, masculine pose with this image. Most people were unconvinced

Source: Photo by Steve Liss/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images/Getty Images

January of 2019 over funding for border security (Morrow, 2019). Comments such as this are intended, among other things, to feminize and emasculate politicians.

The expectations for feminine behavior could not be more different! As the example of the Iron Lady shows, women who enter typical masculine realms like politics or business are at risk of being smeared as inappropriately feminine. While such gender roles have a long history going back to the Bronze Age, if not further, they found their current form in the doctrine of separate spheres that has characterized Western society. Originally dating to the Victorian era (the period of Queen Victoria's reign in Britain in the 19th century), the idea was that there were two different spheres of life, one suited to men and one suited to women. Women were expected to be the "queens" of the domestic or private realm as their alleged natural preference for modesty, virtue, and nurturing prepared them for a life of raising children and caring for families. By contrast, the public realm of business and government was for men. Women who violated this distinction by being active in male realms were seen as morally suspect and thus worthy of character attacks. It is important to note, of course, that plenty of women were working for wages due to economic necessity, so this doctrine applied mostly to upper and middle-class women. Yet, in the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries, working-class women who were out in the male realm of work were often assumed to be "loose women" or prostitutes (Kessler-Harris, 1982, p. 75).

The notion that women should stay confined to the domestic sphere and should not meddle in business or politics has deep historical roots. Many powerful women in



IMAGE 13.3 This mosaic in the Basilica of San Vitale (Ravenna, Italy) displays Empress Theodora in all her splendor

Source: Photo courtesy of Marlena Whiting

history have controversial, if not downright negative, reputations. A famous example is Empress Theodora (ca. 500–548 CE; see Image 13.3), who reigned the Byzantine Empire, centered in modern-day Turkey, by the side of her husband Justinian. Contemporaries frowned on the fact that the emperor allowed his wife to play such a prominent role in affairs of state. They liked it even less that he had married her in the first place. Theodora had not been a noblewoman, but the daughter of a low-class circus bear trainer and had made a living as an actress before meeting Justinian. In fact, the pair could only marry after the law had been changed, for actresses were not allowed to marry people from the higher classes! (Cesaretti, 2004; Potter, 2015).

According to the contemporary author Procopius, Theodora had not only been an actress in her youth, but also a prostitute, who offered her body to customers as soon as she was old enough to do so (*Secret History* 9.11–12). With relish, the author delves into her many and varied sexual exploits. Allegedly, Theodora was so insatiable that she “would bed down with her fellow diners in groups all night long. And when all were exhausted from doing this, she would turn to their servants, all thirty of them, if that’s how many there were, and couple with each of them separately” (*Secret History* 9.16; Procopius, 2010). There is little reason to assume that these wild allegations are true. In fact, accusations of promiscuity are fairly typical. They have been made against many powerful women throughout the centuries, suggesting that the true merit of a woman does not lie in her brains or strength of character, but in her chastity.

The expectations for appropriate feminine behavior have changed over time and are slowly changing even today. Nevertheless, it is clear that modern-day women are still vulnerable to character attacks for violating traditional norms of femininity. The insults have shifted and often rely on implicit biases rather than explicit sexism.

For instance, women political candidates today are called “unlikeable,” a charge rarely used for male candidates (Potter, 2019). (And in fact, male political candidates like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are often rewarded for being surly and unlikeable!) But this insult suggests that women who are policy wonks are not appropriately feminine and caring, and such an insult can take the place of someone saying, “I would never vote for a woman to be president.” Blatant sexism has been largely replaced with more subtle insults that still so far have prevented women in the United States from navigating their way out of the gendered double bind. It seems, then, that the glass ceiling which prevents women from reaching the highest offices in politics still exists. And it is not just in politics that women struggle to break through. In the business world, just 25 of the world’s 500 largest companies were led by women, which equates to 5 percent (Abadi, 2018).

SEXUALITY AND CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

As we have seen in the case of Empress Theodora, sexuality has been a constant theme that character assassins used to attack a target. Accusing a target of being promiscuous or having extramarital affairs can damage their character and show them to be a liar, hypocrite, or lacking in restraint. The famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, as we discussed in Chapter 3, was frequently accused during his early career of being a sexual pervert. Freud in his works published in the 19th and early 20th centuries emphasized the role of human sexuality in psychological disorders as well as everyday life. Sex was a delicate subject in the relatively conservative upper-class social atmosphere in Europe of that time. Freud’s scientific interest in human sexuality served as a suitable excuse for his opponents to launch persistent character attacks against the psychiatrist and his alleged relationships with colleagues and clients (Kerr, 1994).

Rumors of promiscuity or affairs may especially be damaging when political candidates take on “family values” as a campaign refrain. We have already seen how damaging those accusations were to Gary Hart’s 1988 presidential campaign. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton also faced impeachment as a result of being untruthful about a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky, who at the time was an intern in the White House. While the Senate ultimately did not reach the two-thirds majority needed to remove him from office, this imbroglio is certainly a dark mark on his lifetime of political service. Likewise, as one writer notes, the #MeToo movement, a global movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault, is forcing the public to reassess Clinton’s legacy. Clinton had been treated as a “roguish lothario” but may now be facing a reputation as a sexual predator (Andelic, 2018).

Cultural norms influence how different publics react to these attacks, as we have seen in Chapter 9 and elsewhere in the book. While former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi has since come under fire for allegedly having sex with underage women, he still was the longest serving prime minister in Italian history despite a well-known reputation as a womanizer. As one journalist noted, Italians do not seem to care about their leaders’ private sex lives, but they do care about corruption, which is what ultimately became Berlusconi’s political downfall (Jebreal, 2018).

It seems worthy to note that again, gendered double-standards come into play when thinking about how the media and public react to accusations of promiscuity. In fact, men often weather such charges better, as it used to be the case that a “boys will be boys” mentality applied to powerful men. Yet, women are often subject to **slut-shaming**, which is the practice of character attacking individuals, especially women, who are perceived by the attacker as violating expectations of appropriate sexual behavior. Men, too, have been subjected to slut-shaming, but this tends to be far less common.

The charges of promiscuity that have been levelled at many women throughout the ages would also await Monica Lewinsky. She was harassed by the media to the extent that she has treated for a serious emotional disorder (Lewinsky, 2018). Lewinsky has spoken publicly about her role in the scandal and is clear to note that she was not blameless in engaging in the affair with then-President Clinton. However, she also notes that she was slut-shamed and accused of seducing a man far older than she was with more power than anyone else in the world. Her name, as one journalist remembers, became a verb that meant to ruin a dress (Fessler, 2018). As Reeves and Ingraham (2020) show in their research, slut shaming is a common online practice that happens not just to public figures, but also to ordinary people, especially teens and young adults.

One favored tactic of character assassins is to accuse their targets of being gay. After all, stigma and persecution against LGBTQ community and individuals exist in most countries across the world (Simmons, 2017). While more countries are moving to legalize same-sex marriage, that does not mean homophobia and transphobia have disappeared. LGBTQ youth report high rates of bullying, and in some countries, engaging in same-sex relationships remains actually illegal (*LGBT facts and figures*, 2018). Such an attack is used to demonstrate the target’s alleged deviance. Gender and sexuality intertwine in character attacks, too, as calling a male gay may also be an attack on his masculinity in addition to an accusation of being outside of the sexual mainstream. These attacks unfold as the target is “outed” by the attacker. If the attacks are false, the target is forced into the uncomfortable position of describing his sexual history in response. Yet, if the attacks are true, and the target had previously not publicly disclosed their sexuality for whatever reason, an intensely personal decision has been revoked from her, as their sexuality becomes public knowledge. Stonewall, an advocacy group for inclusivity, says “Telling someone about your sexuality or gender identity must always be a personal decision. No person has the right to take that decision away. Publicly outing someone robs that person of the chance to define who they are in their own terms, if they even want to” (Ingold, 2018).

An early example of politicians being publicly outed as gay is the infamous Eulenburg Affair in early 20th-century Germany. The country was ruled by Kaiser Wilhelm II (see Image 13.4) at the time, who spent many happy days drinking and hunting with his close friends and advisers at Liebenberg Castle. However, those merry times came to a sad end when the journalist Maximilian Harden revealed that Philipp, Prince of Eulenburg and Hertefeld, one of the core members of this “Liebenberg Round Table,” had an affair with another man! In fact, Harden alleged, the Kaiser was surrounded by a whole bunch of homosexuals! He suggested that it was due to their effeminate influence that Germany conducted such a weak international policy, hence revealing that his allegations were politically motivated—he wanted to remove the emperor’s



IMAGE 13.4 According to his opponents, Kaiser Wilhelm II surrounded himself with homosexual friends. The insinuations were clear to all

Source: Imperial War Museum

counsellors from power. The scandal was enormous. Not only was homosexuality associated with weakness at the time, but homosexual acts were actually forbidden under German law. Trials were held, careers destroyed, reputations broken. Eulenburg and others would never play a role in politics again, and while Wilhelm II himself was not openly accused, the whole affair inevitably damaged him as well (Domeier, 2010; Icks & Shiraev, 2020, pp. 105–106; Winzen, 2010).

While it may remain the case for some time that being accused of being gay is associated with having an effeminate character, at least in the United States, some politicians are speaking openly about their sexual orientation. Pete Buttigieg, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, ran for the Democratic nomination for president in 2020 and excited many potential voters with his relatively moderate policies and mid-western ethos. Buttigieg is openly gay and campaigned with his husband, Chasten Buttigieg, who has been a popular fundraiser for “Mayor Pete” and his campaign. In fact, one of the main ideas from his compelling stump speech is how important politics is to everyday life because, in his words, “my marriage exists by the grace of a single vote on the Supreme Court” (Burns, 2019). Here, he is referring to the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision which legalized same sex marriage in the United States. Many relate to the stories Mayor Pete tells about searching for belonging as a young adult in the closet, fearful that his sexual orientation would prevent him from his desire to serve in the high political office. Thus, it is the case that many are becoming more open to a diversity of sexual orientations which may undermine the impact of character assassins in the future. But it is and has been a slow road, and some countries have moved further along it than others.

Likewise, strong women who buck gender norms may also find themselves being smeared as lesbians. Tabloids in the United States and United Kingdom routinely spread rumors that Hillary Clinton was a lesbian and that her marriage to Bill Clinton was a farce for political convenience. As Amanda Marcotte (2016) writes in *Slate*, the reasons that the media smeared Clinton for being a lesbian are not hard to identify. People who are afraid of women in power, she claims, often use this tactic. “The rumor isn’t just misogynist either but also homophobic, in that it assumes ‘lesbian’ is an insult,” she writes (Marcotte, 2016). The rumors also sought to delegitimize the Clintons’ marriage. Likewise, in the 1930s, Washington, D.C. was abuzz with rumors that the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, was a lesbian. In this case, the historical record is unclear. She certainly did have close relationships with women who were known to be lesbians, and she wrote passionate letters to journalist Lorena Hickok (Peyser, 2015). The rumors, however, may have been intended to smear Roosevelt for her outspoken activity in her husband’s White House.

In sum, despite the great strides that have been made in the United States and Western Europe, as well as in some other parts of the world, for women’s rights and LGBTQ equality, sexuality is still a focus of character assassins. This can take many forms, including spreading rumors of promiscuity, which may cast doubt on a person’s moral compass. Character attacks based in sexuality may also include casting someone as gay, an attack that assumes that homosexuality is a form of deviance that would be seen as an insult. Underlying these attacks is a heteronormative assumption that sexuality can only be practiced in one particular manner. These attacks may also tie into a person’s character in that they are allegedly not who they appeared or seemed to be.

In this chapter, we have explored the ways in which gender and sexuality can provide fodder for character attacks. Gender expression and sexuality are seen as deeply personal parts of someone’s being, making them potentially powerful ways of accusing someone of hypocrisy, lies, or misleading an audience. Thus, these elements

of character may index someone's morality or trustworthiness. Yet, one of the reasons that these attacks can resonate with audiences is that many people still have entrenched notions of what "proper" sexuality is and what "appropriate" gender behavior looks like for men and women. While these stereotypes are slowly changing, there is no doubt that they will still fuel the charge against women in politics as "shrill" or "unlikeable."

Expectations of "appropriateness" regulate all social areas including occupations. A person's good reputation matters in most fields of work. To some of these professional activities we will turn in our concluding chapter.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- When an individual learns about or identifies with a particular gender, this process involves understanding, evaluating, and accepting particular patterns of behavior. They are called gender roles—prescriptions and expectations assigned to genders on the female–male continuum, but also as gender non-conforming. Intersectionality as a principle refers to how gender, race, and class overlap and intersect with one another to form our unique identities.
- Gender has long provided fodder for character attacks. Stereotypical masculine traits are associated with leadership in both business and politics. Character attacks based on gender typically comprise some type of accusation that the target is engaging in behavior that is a violation of appropriate gendered behavior.
- The expectations for appropriate feminine behavior have changed over time and are slowly changing. Nevertheless, it is clear that modern-day women are still vulnerable to character attacks for violating traditional norms of femininity, which typically include being nurturing and caring for others.
- Sexuality has been a constant theme that assassins used to attack a target. Accusing a target of being promiscuous or having extramarital affairs can damage their character and show them to be a liar, hypocrite, or lacking in restraint.
- One favored tactic of character assassins is to accuse their targets of being gay. Such an attack is used to demonstrate their alleged deviance. Gender and sexuality intertwine in character attacks, too, as calling a male gay may also be an attack on his masculinity in addition to an accusation of being outside of the sexual mainstream.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Why do you think gender remains such a powerful way for people's characters to be smeared?
2. Why do you think sexuality plays a very visible role in character attacks?
3. How do you think women running for political office or seeking power in corporate business should respond to character assassins who accuse them of being "unfeminine" or trying to "act like men"?

4. Can you think of examples of countries or societies that have elected female leaders and seem to be comfortable with women in power? What characteristics do these societies share?
5. How should someone respond when character assassins out them as gay or bisexual? Discuss this in a context of a specific country or community.

KEY TERMS

Gender A complex set of behavioral, cultural, or psychological features associated with an individual's sex.

Gender nonconforming People whose gender identity or gender expression does not conform to that typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender roles Prescriptions and expectations assigned to genders on the female–male continuum.

Intersectionality How gender, race, and class overlap and intersect with one another to form our unique identities.

Sex Anatomical and physiological characteristics or features of males and females, the two typically assigned sexes.

Sexual orientation Romantic or sexual attraction to people of a specific sex or gender.

Slut-shaming The practice of character attacking individuals, especially women, who are perceived by the attacker as violating expectations of appropriate sexual behavior.

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Character Attacks in Sports, Science, and Entertainment

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe the key features of character attacks in the areas of entertainment, sports, and science.
- Identify the similarities and differences between character attacks targeted at celebrities and politicians.
- Discuss the added dynamics with character attacks in entertainment.
- Explain some methods of reputation management among celebrities.

Michael Jackson (1958–2009; see Image 14.1) remade popular music and entertainment in the late 20th century. Hailed as the “King of Pop,” he was a singing legend and a dancing icon (The Grammys, 2017). He recorded a great number of hit songs, videos, and best-selling albums. Hundreds of renowned performers claimed his art as their major inspiration. Days before premiering a new show, he died at age 50 of a cardiac arrest.

Every celebrity is a convenient target of character attacks. Yet, Jackson stood out as perhaps the most targeted of all. His off-stage behavior, his decisions, and his lifestyle all provoked a barrage of awe, admiration, as well as negativity, accusations, or plain smears. He had a problem with prescription drugs (Bertram, 2020). He underwent a number of plastic surgeries to completely reshape his face. His eccentricities were constant, earning him the nickname “Wacko Jacko.” On his ranch he had a private amusement park with trains, rides, and a petting zoo. He kept a pet chimpanzee called Bubbles. He was a notorious spender. Jackson also constantly surrounded himself with children. His attraction to young boys was well known, and he often appeared in photographs with them (Hamilton, 2019). Rumors and then heartbreaking revelations of several people followed. Charged with child molestation, he stood trial in 2005. He was cleared of all charges, but his reputation took a serious hit.

The controversy over Jackson’s sexual proclivities and predation has not abated since his death in 2009. HBO released a four-hour documentary in 2019 entitled



IMAGE 14.1 Michael Jackson was known not just for his singing and dancing, but also for his eccentric fashion and lifestyle

Source: Photo by the White House Photo Office, CC0 1.0

Leaving Neverland that featured two new men accusing Jackson of sexually abusing them when they were children. The documentary showed raw interviews with these men and their families about the ways in which Jackson enticed them into his magical and glamorous world (Tsioulcas, 2019). The estate of Michael Jackson sued HBO, attempting to stop them from airing the documentary. Their lawsuit claimed the documentary was a “tabloid character assassination” (Fitzpatrick, 2019), “a one-sided marathon of unvetted propaganda to shamelessly exploit an innocent man no longer here to defend himself” (Guardian Staff, 2019), and a “public lynching” (Romano, 2019). HBO fought back and aired the documentary as originally planned.

What can we learn from this case? The guilt or innocence of Jackson needs to be established in court. Here, we are interested in how the materials spread in the media and echoed by public opinion impacted Jackson’s reputation posthumously. The key takeaways include the fact that character assassination also occurs outside of the realm of domestic or international politics. Character assassination targeting celebrities has to deal with the idolization that many fans have for sports stars and artists. While we may admire or respect some politicians, we typically do not adore most of them with the ardor we feel about celebrities! In fact, many of us expect, reluctantly or not, that politicians can be somewhat shady. Even though this topic involving celebrities may not have an impact on governance, given the amount of money attached to sports and entertainment, it is undoubtedly a significant area for exploration. Likewise, celebrities certainly exercise influence on the values and attentions of the dominant public.

This chapter covers the similarities and differences between character assassination in the realms of politics, science, and entertainment and explores the social significance of the topic. Because science is very different from sports and entertainment, we deal with that case last. We start by looking at the functions or goals of character assassination in all these domains.

CHARACTER ATTACKS IN ENTERTAINMENT AND POLITICS: SIMILARITIES

What do character assassins hope to achieve when they attack celebrities? We use the umbrella term **celebrity** to refer to a status of widespread public recognition due to attention from mass media or social networks. Celebrities are famous people such as athletes, singers, actors, and artists, or those who are affiliated with them. In politics, people launch attacks because they hope to gain some advantage over their target. This advantage often involves winning an election, which is a very pragmatic goal. In entertainment, pragmatic goals can involve spoiling record deals, canceling television shows, bailing out of contracts, and ending arena tours—the possibilities are almost endless. Table 14.1 summarizes these similarities.

Character attacks may surface as extortion: a potential attacker demands money from a celebrity for the promise not to reveal some damaging information about him

TABLE 14.1 Similarities between character assassination in politics and entertainment

Similarity	Use in Entertainment
Goals and motives	Defeat an opponent in a sporting event Rattle them
Influence of social media	Spread character assassination broadly
Incentive to apologize or respond	Can potentially lessen negative impacts of an attack
Negative impacts	Loss of endorsement deals Canceled shows or concert tours

or her. In 2020, a Russian national soccer team striker was reportedly blackmailed for money for an embarrassing video of him engaged in a sexual act. When the athlete refused to pay up, the blackmailer released the video on social media as an apparent punishment. The player—never mind that his privacy was violated—was relentlessly ridiculed in social media. He was suspended from the national team.

Character assassination in athletics, as the last example suggests, illustrates how the functions and goals of attackers are similar between celebrities and politicians. After all, if character attacks are used to gain money, vie for advantage, or to defeat an opponent, there seems perhaps like no better place to do this than sports. In addition, character attacks might represent a more extreme form of trash talking, which is so common between opposing teams. Athletes and their supporters often use smears as a way to bring down their opponent. Especially in sports that require a great deal of mental stamina, these attacks can be a powerful way to throw opponents off of their A game.

While the examples of athletes with feuds are too numerous to create any type of list, one classical example will suffice. Consider Nancy Kerrigan (b. 1969) and Tonya Harding (b. 1970), who were involved in a feud so legendary that it became a 2017 movie. *I, Tonya* is an acclaimed film that earned several of its stars Oscar nominations. Harding and Kerrigan both competed in women's figure skating and were intense rivals on and off the ice. They also presented very different public images. Kerrigan was poised and polite, with fancy endorsement deals from big companies, while Harding was much rougher around the edges, having grown up poor and often competing in outfits that she had sewn herself. In 1994, at an event that would determine who made it on to the U.S. Olympic team, a masked man viciously hit Kerrigan in the knee with a baton. Even the injury did not prevent Kerrigan from earning a spot on the Olympic team. Harding was unsympathetic to Kerrigan's injury, saying in a televised interview that she was going to "whip her butt" at the Olympics (qtd. in Oliveira, 2017). Yet, it quickly came out that people connected to Harding, including her ex-husband, orchestrated the attack on Kerrigan. Harding insisted she did not know about it, but whether she did or not is far from clear in the historic record. The resulting investigation became a media circus, and regardless of the facts, Harding's name became infamously associated with the attack. Even President Obama once told a crowd of supporters, "Folks said there's no way Obama has a chance unless he goes and kneecaps the person ahead of us, does a Tonya Harding" (qtd. in Lester, 2009). Interestingly, the characters of both Harding and Kerrigan suffered, as the media portrayed Kerrigan (who went on to win an Olympic silver medal) as a self-absorbed princess and Harding as a trashy criminal (Holmes, 2014).

The Harding-Kerrigan feud also illustrates the power of the media in hurling character attacks at athletes, which is our next similarity. We have already seen numerous examples of the media coming after politicians. The activities of celebrities are newsworthy, both on gossip-type shows like *TMZ* and in more mainstream media. So, the media can get involved in the character assassination of celebrities, much like with politicians.

We will return to the question of the role-model status of athletes and entertainers soon, but for now, it is important to note that many young people look up to athletes.

So, when their behavior falls short, the media and social media commentators often grab onto mistakes that may linger in the form of tweets or news stories. When celebrities' characters are seen to be flawed, they may lose endorsement deals or be dropped from teams. For instance, Olympic swimmer Ryan Lochte lost support from sponsors Speedo and Ralph Lauren, among others, when his story about being robbed at gunpoint at the 2016 Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro turned out to be a lie (ESPN.com, 2016). Thus, just like in political character assassination, the media often turn out to wield powerful weapons that can present challenges for athletes and entertainers.

We can also see one other similarity between politicians and celebrities in the way they can respond to character attacks. We talked a bit about apologies and non-apologies in Chapter 8, and it is worth returning to them here. Much like politicians, celebrities often have a high incentive to apologize to avoid the potential negative impacts of character assassination. Let's look at an example of a well-known apology from a celebrity. Tiger Woods (see Image 14.2) did for the sport of golf what Michael Jackson did for popular music. Golf Channel calls him the "most prolific talent of his generation" and in fact, one could argue that he is one of the greatest athletes, of any sport, of all time (*Tiger Woods*, 2019). He has won 14 titles at major golf tournaments and has 82 PGA tour wins since going pro in 1996. While he garnered attention for a 2019 comeback that led to a victory at the Masters, one of the most prestigious golf tournaments in the United States, most of the headlines about him in the last decade or so have been negative (Cote, 2017). There were numerous reports about his infidelity, sex addiction, and rage. For much of the early 2010s, Woods's name was synonymous with



IMAGE 14.2 One of the best golfers of all time, Tiger Woods brought an energy and vitality to the sport before his fall from grace. He is pictured here in 2018

Source: Photo by KA Sports Photos, CC BY-SA 2.0

scandal and failed promise. Let's be clear. Woods was not the victim of false accusations or a baseless smear campaign. He was responsible for the activities that broke the public's trust of him, which became widely publicized. Once again, character matters.

While the road to Woods' comeback would prove long and included many ups and downs, one noteworthy event is his 2010 press conference in which he apologized for his misdeeds. This speech is important because it illustrates the high stakes of a loss of reputation and the lengths that athletes may go to in order to attempt to protect or rebuild their reputations. Let's explore some of the communicative strategies that Woods used to manage his reputation in this press conference. (We will do a short rhetorical analysis, a method we introduced in Chapter 3.) Woods identified himself with the values of humility and accountability. In the very beginning of the speech, for instance, Wood said this: "I want to say to each of you, simply, and directly, I am deeply sorry for my irresponsible and selfish behavior I engaged in."

Likewise, he directly said that he was sorry and alone accountable for his actions. This is clear when he stated:

The issue involved here was my repeated irresponsible behavior. I was unfaithful. I had affairs. I cheated. What I did is not acceptable. And I am the only person to blame. I stopped living by the core values that I was taught to believe in.

(Tiger Woods's Apology, 2010)

This strategy highlighted his strong moral compass and character despite his transgressions. Woods also separated his true values from the context of fame and fortune. He noted: "I knew my actions were wrong. But I convinced myself that normal rules didn't apply. . . . I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to. . . . I felt I was entitled." Thus, it appears that it was the experience of having money and fame that set the scene for his downfall, rather than some intrinsic character flaw. The media reaction to this press conference was generally kind (Ratnesar & Saporito, 2010), illustrating these strategies did a decent job at starting to rebuild his reputation.

The last, yet not least, similarity between celebrities and politicians that is worth highlighting is the potential negative impacts of character assassination. While politicians may lose close races, celebrities may lose endorsement deals, fan support, games, or tickets sales. When allegations of sexual misconduct involving several leading pop stars from the boyband *Big-bang* in South Korea began to surface, and when this behavior was recognized as "epidemic" in the entertainment industry, between February 25 and March 15, 2019, five major South Korean entertainment companies lost 17 percent in market value, which was close to \$500 million (Ng, 2019). It looks like the reputation of the performer matters in musical sales.

You may note that all of the examples we have used so far concern celebrities from our modern era. Indeed, social media and a global communication market have made the iconic status that today's celebrities can achieve wholly unique. That is not to say that there were no famous entertainers and athletes in the distant past. In ancient Rome, for instance, the gladiators and actors who performed in the circus and the theatre could definitely become crowd favorites, but in the absence of mass media their fame would be limited to the city itself. Moreover, such people would have a very low

social status—many of them were even slaves—and were therefore unlikely to evolve into inspiring role models.

Nevertheless, character attacks did occur against prominent entertainers in the past, too, although their fame would have existed on a smaller scale compared to modern-day celebrities. For example, one of the most famous opera singers of all times, Pauline Viardot (1821–1910) from Spain, was a target of relentless character attacks—not for her voice, but for her alleged greed (charging too much money for her concerts), arrogance (snubbing somebody at a reception), or love affairs (her rumored extramarital relations with writers and composers). These attacks were conveyed via private letters. Other attacks were open and more vicious. The famous composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883) published an essay in which he criticized the music of his former mentor, the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864) based on antisemitic premises—he linked Meyerbeer’s music to his Jewish identity, thus claiming that a person’s “Jewishness” could not be associated with “good” music. Although Wagner was trying to hide his authorship, it soon became known.

Character attacks may also have no impact. Let’s return briefly to the King of Pop, Michael Jackson. While his case deals with an example of posthumous character assassination, it also raises the question of the material impact of character assassination, this time on the Jackson estate. The Jackson estate brought in over 2 billion dollars in the decade since his death, mostly by selling shares of music catalogs. The public has not stopped consuming his music in the form of streams on services like Spotify or Pandora. While some local radio stations have made a move to refrain from playing his songs, there has not been a decisive movement or decision to boycott. Immediately after the HBO documentary aired, Jackson’s streaming numbers and plays held mostly consistent with where they had been in the prior weeks (O’Malley Greenburg, 2019). *Forbes* magazine’s media and entertainment editor suggested that artists tainted by allegations of inappropriate acts, including sexual abuse can maintain commercial appeal long after they pass away. Music idols often take their “Teflon crowns” to the grave (O’Malley Greenburg, 2019).

We have already discussed how some politicians seem to be immune from character assassination. They are called “Teflon,” named after a material to which food does not stick and which is often used to make frying pans and other pots for cooking. The same seems to be true for celebrity A-listers. Smears do not stick to some of them. In the next section, we will explore some of the dynamics of character assassination that are different when we look at celebrities.

LET’S DISCUSS

Is it good to be a “bad girl” in the entertainment industry? Does it pay to be character attacked for being a “bad boy”? The famous British band *The Who* made instant headlines in the 1970s for trashing rooms and setting explosives inside toilet bowls in the hotels they were staying at. Consequences? Their concerts were sold out months in advance. The obscure Russian punk-rock band *Pussy Riot* gained global recognition after performing in 2012, without legal permission, in a church. The

Canadian singer Justin Bieber for years has been involved in physical altercations, drug scandals, and arrests. He remains one of the most successful pop stars in the world. Celebrities want to remain noticeable. They want their songs downloaded, shows sold out, and paintings purchased. Many achieve this goal by constantly recording, producing, creating, and designing. Others rely on their old artistic material, which may remain in high demand for some time. Yet the competition in creative industries is tough. Promotion thus often becomes a key to commercial success. What if a tabloid character attack against a performer, in fact, becomes an unexpected promotion? What if the news of a celebrity’s arrest doubles his music downloads? The Russian media personality Alexandr Nevzorov speculated that when a celebrity goes against the mainstream culture, their reputation is suddenly “up” if he or she is suddenly . . . jailed.

Search for cases when character attacks against a celebrity could have been helpful in their artistic business. Under what conditions can the reputation of a “bad girl” or a “bad boy” in entertainment be helpful? Under what circumstances can it be damaging?

**CHARACTER ATTACKS IN ENTERTAINMENT
AND POLITICS: DIFFERENCES**

As we can see, the goals and impacts of character assassination are often similar when we compare politics to entertainment as social realms in which attacks may occur. Yet, there are three additional dynamics to consider when we discuss character attacks on celebrities, summarized in Table 14.2. The first added dynamic is the level of personal connection and fondness that people feel for celebrities. While there are certain political figures that have devoted followings—think of the Bernie Bros (young male supporters of U.S. presidential candidate Bernie Sanders) or the women carrying Michelle Obama tote bags as they tourist about Washington, D.C.—most people do not idolize politicians the same way that they do celebrities. Moreover, as briefly mentioned earlier,

TABLE 14.2 Added dynamics with character attacks in entertainment

Dynamic	Examples
Personal connection to celebrities	Serve as role models Bets on performance Sense of deep disappointment for failures
Personal connection to fan objects	Favorite songs or books have a special value for the fans
Political realm	Smearred from many sides for engaging in political commentary or protest

celebrities, especially athletes, are often treated as role models, most often for children. Yet sports are important to adults, too. “People place their hopes and dreams on athletes’ performances; they bet their homes, their cars, and their life savings on games. The pressure on today’s athletes extends far beyond their performance in games,” write Holly M. Burch and Jennifer B. Murray (1999) in the *Sports Lawyers Journal* (p. 250).

While many athletes, including basketball star Charles Barkley, who remains famous for barroom brawling, have stressed that they do not want to be role models for children, the truth of the matter is that they are, regardless of whether they want to be (Burch & Murray, 1999; Smoll, 2015). And many athletes take that role seriously, expending time and resources doing charitable work, building, for example, baseball diamonds in low-income communities or visiting kids with cancer in the hospital. Psychologists suggest that role models have a considerable impact on a person’s values, education, and chosen training objectives (Smoll, 2015). This means that when athletes are caught using performance enhancing drugs, like baseball players Sammy Sosa and Mark McGuire were, or taking bong hits of marijuana like the swimmer Michael Phelps, it can be especially devastating both to the public and fans. By contrast, global opinion polls suggest that many people want politicians to be truthful but do not always expect them to be. The depth of disappointment that the public may feel when athletes and entertainers “mess up” is likely to be deeper and stems from an idolization of their role in society and their status as role models in general.

The second additional dynamic is that entertainers and other celebrities produce what rhetorical scholar Ashley Hinck (2019) calls **fan objects**, or specific movies, books, songs, and other things fans feel connected to and interpret in particular ways (Jenkins, 2019). One is unlikely (although it is not impossible) to feel deeply and emotionally committed to the stump speech of a politician or a button received from a political campaign. But fans of celebrities do feel intense and deep connections to the songs sung by their favorite artists, or the books written by their favorite authors. One of Hinck’s favorite examples is the *Harry Potter* books. Fans of this series dress up as their favorite characters, attend conventions, play quidditch, listen to Wizard Rock, and even donate to charities because “it is what Hermione would do” (Hinck, 2019). This is simply a different way that fans interact than we do with our politicians.

This raises the question of what to do when a celebrity is being attacked and how to relate to those fan objects when a celebrity has been disgraced. To return to an earlier example, a group of three Michael Jackson fan clubs based in France have sued the accusers in the *Leaving Neverland* documentary, alleging that they have posthumously ruined the singer’s reputation (Blistein, 2019). (Libel laws in France allow for the protection of the reputation of the deceased. Laws in the United States do not.) While this may be an extreme response from serious fans, many others have responded by wondering how to deal with their affection for Michael Jackson’s music. One serious question when dealing with a changing understanding of a character of a popular entertainer is how to stop supporting them financially. Indeed, luxury clothing and handbag designer *Louis Vuitton* announced that they were pulling a Jackson-inspired line after the airing of the documentary (Wolf, 2019).

Many other fans, however, may find themselves feeling rather ambivalent. Reckoning with legacies is, on one hand, about how institutions like the Rock and Roll Hall

of Fame respond to changing perceptions of entertainers' characters. As NPR music critic Ann Powers (2019) wrote in a lengthy and moving essay where she attempted to untangle some of these questions, legacies are often preserved by those with power, but on the other hand, there are fans who use their own judgements. In her mind, then, it is important that individual fans think a little bit about how the music resonates with them in the wake of allegations like this. In spring 2019, she challenged herself to listen to much of Jackson's discography, after having seen the documentary. She did so in an attempt to come to terms with what she thought Jackson's legacy should be. She ultimately concluded that Jackson was "sick" and even "evil" as a person. Yet his music was still communicating grace, sensitivity, and wonder. Ultimately, it is a viewer's or a listener's choice which opinion to use.

Thus, while character assassination, especially of a posthumous variety, may not have as immediate of an impact as political character assassination does when someone loses a campaign, it would be a mistake to conclude that it is not important or impactful. It may make, as this example shows, a great many people rethink their attachment to important cultural objects.

The last dynamic tied up with character assassination of celebrities actually deals with politics. And it is a tricky line that celebrities have to walk. While they have powerful voices that are often amplified by hundreds of thousands or even millions of social media followers, oftentimes, character attacks may result from public political statements. Politicians may expect to make enemies with people who disagree with their policies, yet celebrities often try to appeal to people on both sides of the political spectrum (and this is what most business managers tell them). So, they may be dealt with quite harshly when they open their mouths to weigh in on politics. The prestige and influence that celebrities enjoy does not come from political power but can definitely be wielded to serve political ends (like advocating certain candidates or pushing for certain policies). Yet, as soon as celebrities step into the realm of politics, they often open themselves up to be targets of character attacks.

For example, the American singer Taylor Swift has been under fire for voicing her political views. While Swift has been largely apolitical for most of her long career in the spotlight, in the wake of the 2016 election, she has become increasingly vocal about both Tennessee politics and LGBTQ rights. Yet, her decision to speak up politically has been met with resistance. After her endorsement of Tennessee Democratic candidate Phil Bredesen in the 2018 midterms, one conservative commentator called her myopic and a user of "extreme rhetoric" (Sheffield, 2018). The attacks resurfaced in summer 2019 after Swift released a rainbow-filled music video entitled "You Need to Calm Down" in honor of Pride month and featuring a pro-LGBTQ message. The video and the song's message garnered critiques of Swift's judgment and political knowledge from both the left and the right. Primarily, the public accused her of using Pride and its rainbow imagery to sell records. In addition, in the song, Swift seemingly compares the online hate she receives to hate targeted against LGBTQ people, a comparison that many considered misguided at best, and tone deaf at worst. But perhaps the video's biggest mistake is depicting a crowd of protestors of a Pride parade as blue-collar hillbillies, a stereotyped representation (McDermott, 2019).

As this example shows, one common way that entertainers are taken to task in the media and smeared is for making their political beliefs known. In fact, an everyday

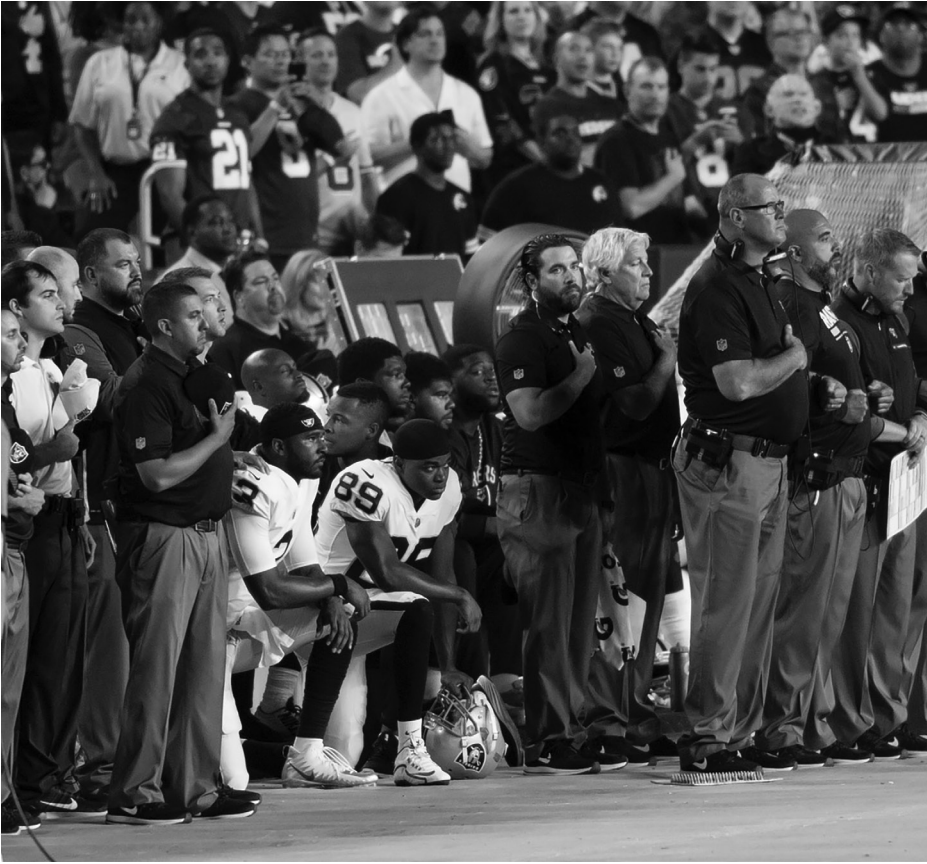


IMAGE 14.3 When NFL players began kneeling during the National Anthem at football games to protest police brutality toward black men, many criticized them and suggested they should stick to sports and not get involved in politics. This photo is from a 2017 game

Source: Photo by Keith Allison, CC BY-SA 2.0

refrain around the Internet is that athletes and celebrities should just shut up and play their sports or sing their songs or make their movies and leave politics to politicians (see Image 14.3).

In this section, we have looked at some of the ways that character attacks against athletes and entertainers are different from those in the realm of politics. It is the additional fan attachment and status as role models that make character attacks resonate in these realms. In the final section, let's look at yet another realm—science.

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION IN SCIENCE

In June 1908, a well-known psychology professor and chair, James Mark Baldwin (1861–1934), was arrested in a house of prostitution and later charged with solicitation. Baldwin, in his late 40s and married, was at that time a renowned scholar at the

highpoint of his academic career. His work was widely cited in top psychology, sociology, and philosophy journals. After the incident, Baldwin claimed his innocence on moral and legal grounds. He fought the charges in court and won. However, authorities at Johns Hopkins University, one of the most prestigious universities in the United States, viewed this case differently. They thought that Baldwin's reputation gradually was becoming a threat to the school's prestige and status. The university demanded his resignation. He obliged and emigrated with his family to France (Wozniak & Santiago-Blay, 2013). Incidentally, his junior associate at Johns Hopkins was the young psychologist James Watson (1878–1958). A talented researcher, he was following in Baldwin's footsteps and became the youngest President of the American Psychological Association at age 37. An early influencer of the global branch in psychology called "behaviorism," Watson was already a famous researcher and a prolific educator. Yet, his secret affair with a graduate student forced authorities to demand his resignation in 1920, just a few years later after the Baldwin scandal. Watson was a married man. Even though he later divorced and married that graduate student, his affair caught the attention of the media and caused a growing public scandal. Watson, whose research was at that time cited globally, had to resign and seek employment away from academia.

Both Baldwin and Watson had explosive temperaments and feisty character traits. They openly clashed with colleagues regarding scholarly issues, methodologies, statistical data, and theories. At times they were unreasonably stubborn and harsh with their colleagues. Yet those pet peeves or character flaws did not play a crucial role in the way they were perceived by the public. The apparent moral transgressions involving their sexual behavior were the crucial tipping points. The threat of massive character attacks and a scandal forced the authorities to take preventive steps and dismiss these famous researchers.

What does character mean to scientists? Being a "good" scientist is often closely tied to scientific procedure and the scientific method. Science is expected to be objective and feature conclusions carefully drawn from evidence gathered in appropriate means. Likewise, scientific papers are expected to undergo a rigorous process of peer review whereby scientists provide feedback on the methods, data, and conclusions, while the authors of the studies respond to that feedback as they refine their arguments. This is expected to ensure that only the highest quality work gets published. As a result, strong moral character for scientists requires a commitment to objectivity and specific procedure.

Much like in politics, debate and controversy are at the heart of science. Discrediting old theories and making new discoveries is how science moves human knowledge forward, after all! Yet, just like political pundits preach a return to civility and a focus on the policy proposals of politicians, debates in science are supposed to be waged on purely scientific terms, with unbiased data. While we often think of scientists as unbiased observers of reality driven by a search for truth, we should acknowledge that they, too, are human, and may find themselves tempted to smear their academic rivals. Moreover, many of the discoveries that scientists may make have immense ideological implications, such as when they discredit Biblical theories of creation or lend support to theories of climate change. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that scientists can be targets of character attacks coming from outside academia as well. This section, then, will identify some unique dynamics that occur when character assassination happens in science.

In Chapter 1, we encountered Robert Gallo, a researcher who helped discover the HIV/AIDS virus. His story shows how mediated representations (in this case, Alan Alda playing him in an HBO movie) can serve as a form of character assassination. Unsurprisingly, these events are much more likely when scientists are on the cutting edge of new discoveries. Most ordinary scientists affiliated with universities or research labs will not get much attention. However, science is imminently political, and scientists can find themselves in the crosshairs of character assassins for their findings quite easily. Keep in mind that many scientists and physicians who treated what was known as “gay cancer” found themselves evicted from their offices or smeared. Likewise, the U.S. Congress refused funding to study HIV/AIDS until 1983 (HIV.gov, 2016).

One similar dynamic between character assassination in politics and science is that scientists can be accused of being morally deviant. They may be called charlatans or womanizers or have other aspects of their personal lives investigated by the public. Like in politics, the hope here is that by discrediting these scientists as people, their scientific findings or research will also come to be seen as unreliable. Charles Darwin, credited with the first investigation of how traits are passed from generation to generation, for instance, has been smeared as a plagiarizer of naturalist Edward Blyth (Ball, 2011). Accusing a scientist of plagiarism is indeed a strike at their moral character and claims to honesty, of course. Likewise, even though his scientific discoveries have largely overshadowed attention to his personal life, Albert Einstein was a known womanizer who had extra-marital affairs (Mallenbaum, 2017). As communication scholars Graham Knight and Josh Greenberg (2011) point out, an important strategy for skeptics of human-caused climate change has been to attack climate scientists (p. 324). They call this strategy **adversarial framing**, which is a form of discrediting opponents on the basis of five reputational dimensions: practices, moral character, competence and qualifications, social associations, and real versus apparent motivations. Accordingly, for some climate change skeptics, one way to smear the character of climatologists is to accuse them of violating not only scientific standards but rather certain moral principles and using ulterior motives in research, which frequently refers to dubious funding.

Smearers can do this by using guilt by association tactics or charges of hypocrisy—strategies that we have already encountered in this volume. If scientists are supposed to be objective, then showing (either accurately or not) that their research is funded by big business and thus not objective, can harm their reputations. This strategy exists on both sides of the climate debate—as a tactic to target scientists that show evidentiary support for human-caused climate change and those who deny such evidence exists. As Knight and Greenberg (2011) show, climate scientists often attacked climate change deniers for being funded by big business, like fossil fuel companies, while the deniers hit back calling them hypocrites because they “were the beneficiaries of funding by the largest interest of all—governments” (p. 333). Likewise, scientists can be painted as motivated by self-interest in the form of research grants and funding and thus not in pursuit of objective and rational science. Much like entertainers such as Taylor Swift, scientists can be smeared when their work is seen as “too political” as well.

Finally, bringing together some of the themes that we explored in the last chapter, female scientists often can be smeared for not adhering to appropriate gender norms for their time, making gendered attacks another component of character assassination

in science. As with politics, science is often seen as a man's job. Even these days, while the percentage of women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields is rising, women and people of color are still underrepresented. In the United States, women earn only 21 percent of bachelor's degrees in STEM and women of color earn only 6 percent of engineering degrees. Even fewer of those women go on to work in STEM fields. Only 30 percent of women with STEM degrees are still working in STEM 20 years later (Society of Women Engineers, n.d.).

Historically, of course, the issue was far more severe. Many female scientists in history have found themselves completely erased from the story of major scientific developments or passed up for prestigious awards. This is so common, in fact, that the phenomenon has a name: the Matilda effect. It is named after Matilda Joslyn Gage, a 19th-century speaker for woman suffrage and an early investigator of how knowledge is produced. In her time, Gage denounced "the tendency of men to prohibit women from reaping the fruits of their own toil, and in fact noticed that the more women worked the more men around her profited and the less credit she got" (Rossiter, 1993, pp. 336–337). The list of examples of women who have been erased or turned into silent collaborators of men's scientific projects is numerous. One case will serve our purposes here. Lise Meitner collaborated with German physicist Otto Hahn in the discovery of nuclear fission. In 1944, Hahn won the Nobel Prize in physics without any mention of her (Rossiter, 1993, p. 329). It was even more likely for women to be erased if they did scientific work with their husbands.

As you can see, the realm of science offers its own standards to judge character and conduct: the elements of scientific inquiry. These include things like objectivity and following a particular procedure. As a result, much like with entertainers, being "too political" can stir up character attacks. We also see gendered attacks occurring in science, illustrating the power of character assassination in this important arena of human activity.

In this chapter, we have switched our focus from politics to entertainment and science. We have noted that the impulses and goals driving character attacks are often similar when we examine these realms. Actors in these interactions are seeking to gain an upper hand over their opponent. But, given the way that fan objects circulate and how athletes and other celebrities can be seen as role models, the stakes can be quite high and have additional dynamics that we considered here. Likewise, both scientists and celebrities can be smeared or subject to attack when they begin to engage in politics.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The media can get involved in the character assassination of celebrities, much like with politicians. In entertainment, pragmatic goals for character attacks can involve spoiling record deals, canceling television shows, bailing out of contracts, and ending arena tours.
- Much like politicians, celebrities often have a high incentive to apologize to avoid the potential negative impacts of character assassination.
- Character attacks in entertainment and sports may have no impact at all or an "alternative" impact. In reverse, in some cases, the positive attention to a celebrity increases because of character attacks.

- There are three additional dynamics to consider in attacks on celebrities. The first is the level of personal connection and fondness that people feel for celebrities. Second, fans of celebrities tend to feel intense and deep connections to the songs sung by their favorite artists, or the books written by their favorite authors. Third, when celebrities step into the realm of politics, they often open themselves up to character attacks.
- Scientists too often become targets of character attacks for their real or apparent moral transgressions, hypocrisy, social or political affiliations, and motivation.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. In this chapter, we have identified a number of ways that character attacks in the realm of entertainment are similar and different to attacks in politics. Can you think of any additional dynamics (either similar or different) not mentioned in this chapter?
2. A celebrity's political beliefs and their character are frequently linked together in the minds of the audience. In which cases do you think it is important for an artist not to reveal his or her political beliefs and in which cases do you think they should?
3. We shifted our focus to entertainment and science. Can you think of other realms of human interaction that feature character assassination? In what ways are these realms similar to and different from politics?
4. Why do you think the scientific method is so important for setting the standards of character in the realm of science? Please explain.

KEY TERMS

Adversarial framing A form of discrediting opponents on the basis of five reputational dimensions: practices, moral character, competence and qualifications, social associations, and real versus apparent motivations.

Celebrity A status of widespread public recognition due to the attention from mass media or social networks.

Fan objects Specific movies, books, songs, and other things related to celebrities that fans feel connected to and interpret in particular ways.

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Conclusion

American presidents and Chinese Party officials, Roman senators and Byzantine empresses, French kings and British prime ministers, climate scientists, figure skaters, and composers of classical music—we have encountered many of them in this book. We have seen that character assassination occurs in many cultures across time and space. We have learned that certainly it is not limited to the realm of politics, but is also a recurring phenomenon in business, science, sports, religion, and other social spheres. Despite this wide range of social and cultural contexts, we have also seen that practices of character assassination often show remarkable similarities, allowing us to study them in comparative perspectives. History, rhetoric, political science, political psychology, communication studies—all provide useful tools that can help us to understand, critically analyze, and defend against character attacks.

Living in the 21st century, you have undoubtedly witnessed many instances of character assassination—on television, online, or in your daily personal encounters. At times, it may seem that fake news, vicious campaign ads, and insulting tweets are growing more frequent and fiercer in nature every year. Think of this—perhaps you have even been a target yourself. Without doubt, the rise of the Internet and social media has been conducive to practices of character assassination, while political polarization is probably a stimulating factor as well. However, as we tried to show in this book, the current situation is not unique. As history shows, personal attacks against Roman senators or 19th-century American presidents could be just as vicious, manipulative, and devastating as any allegation, tweet, or meme you may encounter today. At the same time, the 21st-century mass media environment provides opportunities for character assassination that our ancestors could only dream of. In these circumstances, it is important to develop a keen sense of media savviness. If you learn how character attacks function and what character attackers aim to achieve, you are more likely to recognize them for what they are and less likely to fall under their venomous spell.

Clearly, in this book we have tried to understand only a small slice of this incredibly rich, diverse, and intriguing phenomenon that is reflective of all aspects of our lives. Still, even though we have published books and research articles on this subject, studying character assassination appears a bigger challenge than we dared to expect when we were starting this project ten years ago—and we as a team knew it was huge to begin with. But we are not ending our work anytime soon. Please share online what you have learned and what you would like to discuss in the future. We invite you to join us on <https://carpresearchlab.org/> Onward!

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